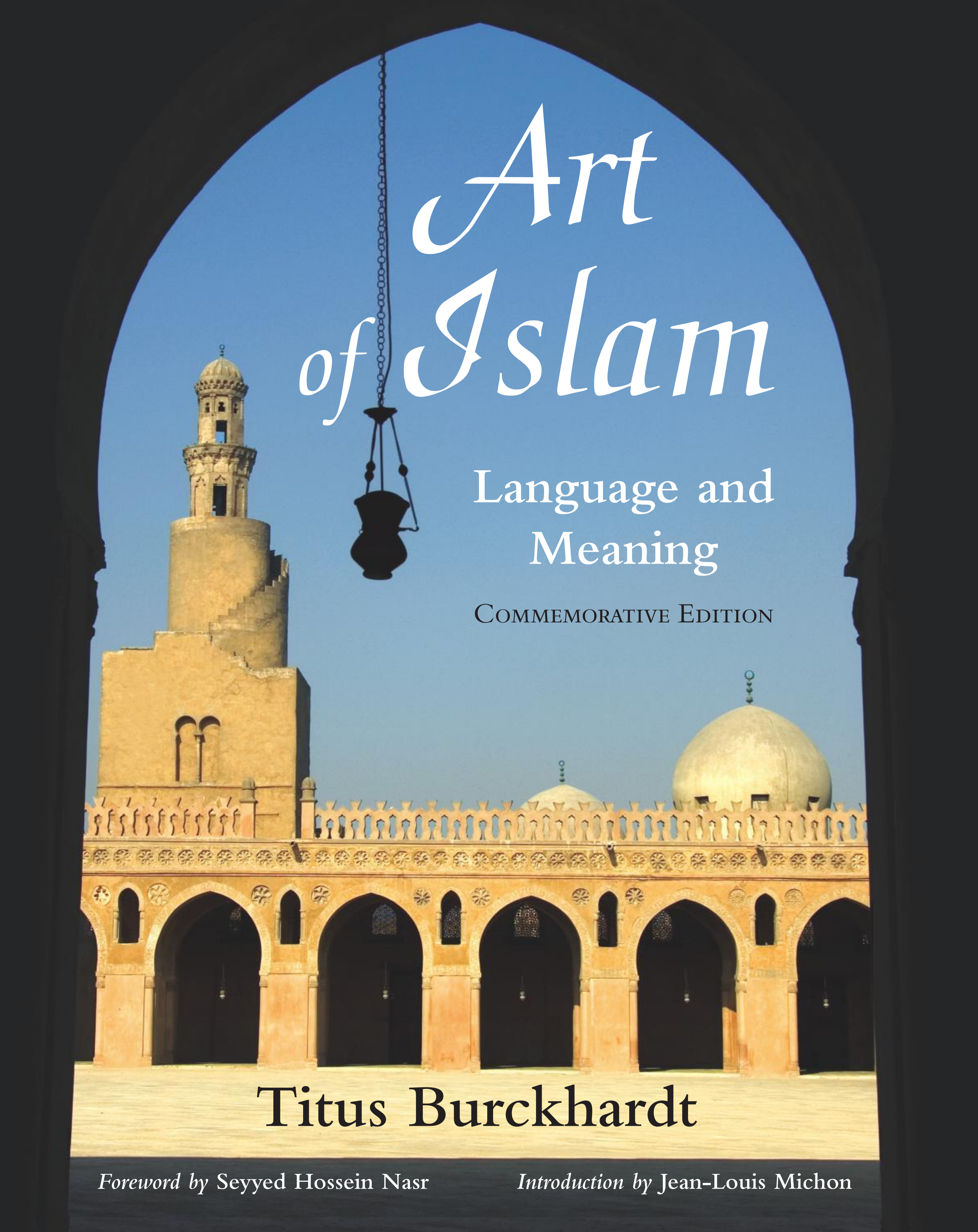


Art of Islam

Language and Meaning

Commemorative Edition

Titus Burckhardt

Foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr *Introduction by* Jean-Louis Michon

World Wisdom

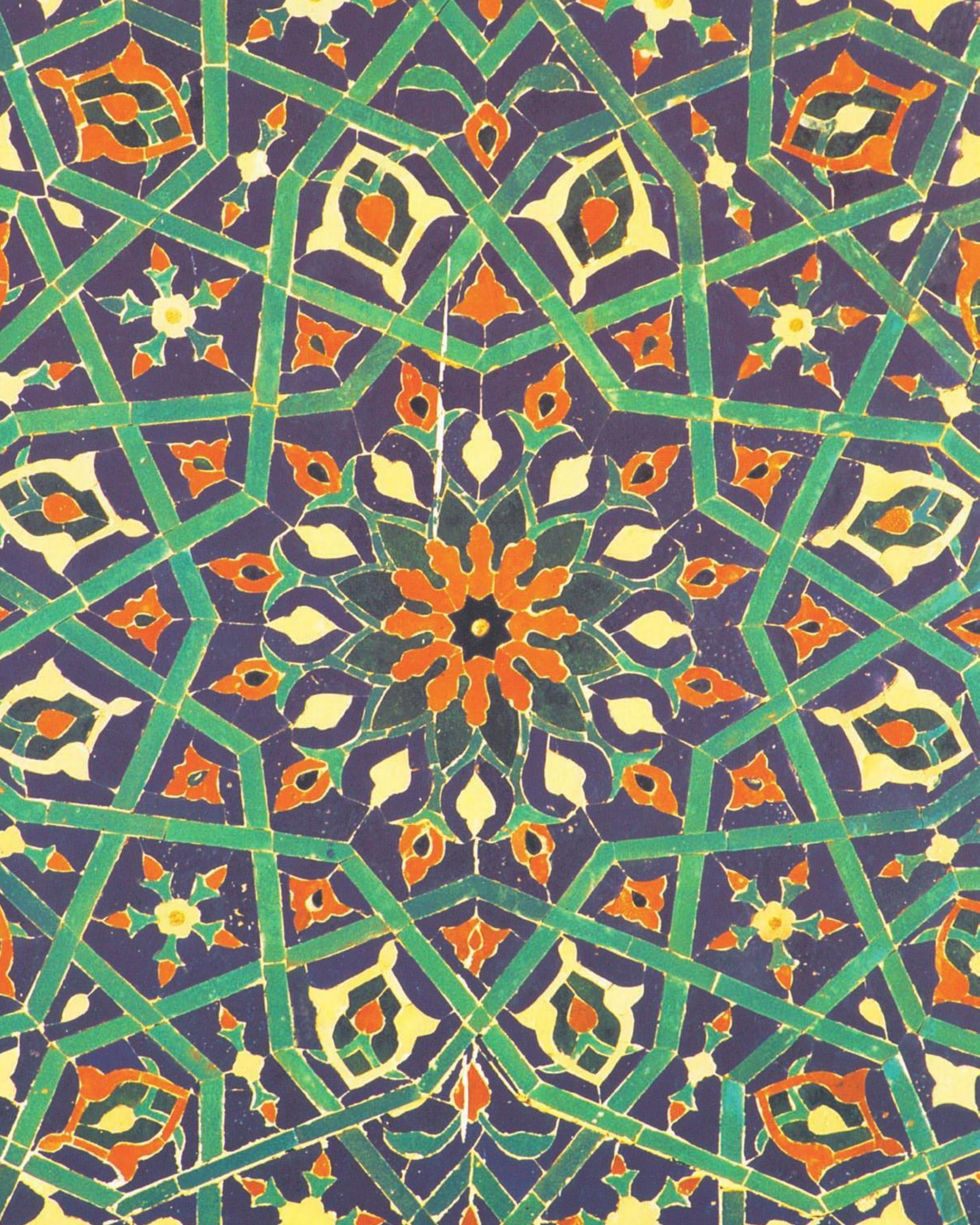
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Contents

Foreword

Despite the vast amount of documentation and descriptive studies already carried out by Western scholars, Islamic art has remained until now a singularly neglected field as far as the study in depth of its inner meaning is concerned. Since the taste of Western historians of art has been molded by several centuries of humanistic art from the Renaissance on, and even before that by a sacred art based primarily on the icon and secondarily on sculpture, Western scholars have naturally found the great schools of Indian and Far Eastern art of more interest than the Islamic, even when they have turned their eyes beyond the confines of Western civilization. During the past century works of profundity gradually began to appear on the arts of India and the Far East, revealing their symbolism and the metaphysical principles underlying them. This activity may be said to have culminated in the writings of A. K. Coomaraswamy, who unfolded before the English speaking world the unbelievable depth of the traditional art of India and also to a large extent that of mediaeval Europe.

Meanwhile, despite certain works of inspiration which appeared here and there, Islamic art continued to be a closed book as far as its symbolic meaning was concerned. Its major art forms such as calligraphy were considered as "decoration" or "minor arts" and people looked in vain in this tradition for art forms which were central elsewhere. In addition, those who became interested in Islamic art for its so-called "abstract" nature often did so for the wrong reasons. They thought that Islamic art is abstract in the same sense as modern Western art, whereas the two stand at opposite poles. The result of the one form of abstraction is the glass skyscrapers which scar most modern cities, and the fruit of the other is the Shāh Mosque and the Taj Mahal. The one seeks to evade the ugliness of naturalistic and condensed forms of nineteenth-century European art by appeal to a mathematical abstraction of a purely human and rationalistic order. The other sees in the archetypes residing in the spiritual empyrean the concrete realities of which the so-called realities of this world are nothing but shadows and abstractions. It therefore seeks to overcome this shadow by returning to the direct reflections of the truly concrete world in this world of illusion and abstraction which the forgetful nature of man takes for concrete reality. The process of so-called "abstraction" in Islamic art is, therefore, not at all a purely human and rationalistic process as in modern abstract art, but the fruit of intellection in its original sense, or vision of the spiritual world, and an ennobling of matter by recourse to the principles which descend from the higher levels of cosmic and ultimately Metacosmic Reality.

The writings of Titus Burckhardt have the great virtue of having brought to light for the first time in the modern West this and other fundamental principles of Islamic art and of having achieved at last for Islamic art what Coomaraswamy did for the art of India. Burckhardt has himself mentioned in his earlier works that Islamic art derives from the wedding of wisdom (*ḥikmah*) and craftsmanship (*fann* or *ṣināʿah*). Therefore to be able to explain this art in depth requires an intimate knowledge of both, which Burckhardt possessed to a startling degree. He is already known as one of the most masterly expositors of Sufism in the West, and his *Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*, as well as translations of Ibn ʿArabī and ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī, have become classics. He speaks from within the Sufi tradition of the profoundest aspects of wisdom with an authority which can only come from actual experience and realization of the world of the Spirit.

Moreover, Burckhardt was himself an artist in the original, and not the trivial and modern, sense of the word. He also spent a lifetime in intimate contact with traditional masters of the arts in North Africa and played a major role in saving the city of Fez and its living artistic traditions. He, therefore, combined within himself in a unique manner the qualifications necessary to present at last to the Western world the definitive work on Islamic art as far as the meaning and spiritual significance of this art are concerned.

In the pages which follow, the reader will not be presented with an exhaustive documentation of every aspect of Islamic art, which in any case is impossible in a single volume. He will be exposed to the essence of this art and presented with keys with which he can open the door of the treasuries of Islamic art wherever they may be found. The author presents Islamic art as a direct derivative of the principles and form of the Islamic revelation and not as historical accretions accidentally amalgamated together, as so many other art historians would have us believe. Burckhardt begins with the Origin and, in the world of forms, with the Kaʿba and takes the reader through the major aspects of Islamic art, the relation of this art to liturgy, to the polarization between the nomads and sedentary peoples, to the great syntheses of Islamic art and architecture, and finally to the Islamic city, where all the different aspects of Islamic art are to be seen in their natural rapport with the rhythm of life dictated by the Divine Law and illuminated by the presence of the spiritual light contained within Sufism.

In his earlier works, especially *Sacred Art in East and West* and *Moorish Culture in Spain*, Burckhardt had already written some of the profoundest pages on Islamic art. In the present work he brings together a lifetime of outward and inward experience to produce a peerless work, one in which Islamic art is at last revealed to be what it really is, namely the earthly crystallization of the spirit of the Islamic revelation as well as a reflection of the heavenly realities on earth, a reflection with the help of which the Muslim makes his journey through the terrestrial environment and beyond to the Divine Presence Itself, to the Reality which is the Origin and End of this art.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Introduction

Anyone who has read or will read Titus Burckhardt's *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, first published in 1976 and, fortunately, republished now, may be interested to look back on the circumstances, remote and immediate, that prepared and finally triggered off the birth of this book, placing it as one of the brilliant jewels which crown the rich career of the author (1908-1984).

Gifted with an acute intelligence and sensitiveness, Burckhardt was attracted, and even fascinated at an early age by the beauty of traditional arts, primarily those of the Christian West where his father, a renowned sculptor, practiced his craft and lived with his family now in Basle and now in Florence. In these cities, Titus frequented art schools and regularly visited the great museums of art, ethnography, and Oriental culture, acquiring year after year a vast knowledge of the civilizations that had produced the monuments and artefacts he admired. Even more, his mental and intuitive faculties led him to clearly perceive the ideals and values that had inspired the architects and artists belonging to the great civilizations and religions of the world, past and present, and to expose the treasures of supernatural wisdom that lay hidden under the productions of sacred art, as also behind the formulations of traditional sciences like cosmology and alchemy.

Conscious that the studies he had made ought to be completed by a direct contact with people living in a context impregnated with traditional beliefs and behaviors, Burckhardt decided to go and live for an undetermined time in a country reasonably unaffected by the conquest of technical progress and the search for material welfare, a country where entering into contact with representatives of the local culture would not require an apprenticeship too difficult and lengthy. By themselves, these conditions pointed to one specific country: Morocco, a close neighbor of Europe, well known for the open and hospitable character of its inhabitants. For Burckhardt, then aged twenty-two, the choice was the more easy since he had already acquired a basic knowledge of Arabic and a strong affinity with the spirit and culture of Islam.

So it happened that during five years, with only a few interruptions during which he visited his family and friends in Basle, Burckhardt lived fully as an autochthon, traveling up and down the northern plains and mountains of North Morocco, observing everything new around him and recording his impressions on personal notes and letters to his friends. These living testimonies, illustrated with many of his drawings, sketches, and black-and-white photographs, were published by Burckhardt himself in the form of a book[1] a few years after he had come back from Morocco and settled in Basle to work there as a chief editor for Urs Graf Verlag, a firm specializing in the reproduction of medieval manuscripts.

This first book, which unfortunately only exists in its original German version, contains a great deal of information that is still valid today, as if Burckhardt had picked up spontaneously typical traits, of the kind that will last as long as the country is not subject to radical changes and disruptions of its ancestral values. During the two main phases of this so to say "initiatic"

[1] With the title *Land am Rande der Zeit* ("Land on the Verge of Time") and subtitled: "A Description of Moroccan Culture—with drawings and photographs by the author, Titus Burckhardt", published by Urs Graf Verlag G.M.B.H., Basle, Autumn 1941.

sojourn, the first one spent in the rural areas of North Morocco, where he exercised several jobs, including the guard and conduct of flocks as a shepherd, and the second one spent entirely in the urban setting of Fez where he studied, with his usual care and concentration, written Arabic and religious science at the Qarawiyyīn University, Burckhardt captured the characteristics of a variety of people: Arabs and Berbers, nomads and sedentaries, peasants, merchants, craftsmen of all kinds, from the hard-working tanners and wool-dyers to the refined artisans of the architectural decor in wood, stucco, and zellij, representatives of the religious and civil authorities, masters and members of Sufi brotherhoods. Encounters with these fellow beings brought him a feeling of satisfaction, as if he had received a teaching about the positive sense of life and a confirmation that Tradition,[2] when followed with respect and confidence, is a faithful guide to serenity and contentment. He also noticed the refraction of Beauty on the people themselves, their attitudes, their garments, the simple tools and utensils they used when cooking or building and decorating their houses.

The intimate relationship which was established between Titus Burckhardt and Morocco, the "Land on the Verge of Time", never faded out. In fact, the basic ideas concerning the link between the art forms (the "language") and their spiritual roots (the "meaning") were already clearly pointed out in his "ouvrage de jeunesse" (a French expression which is sometimes tinged with condescension but, here, is a homage paid to the freshness and insight of the experiences related by the young traveler). These themes continued to mature and were developed between 1935 and 1976 in a series of articles and books dealing with the peculiarities and merits of Islamic art. Since all these writings were finally integrated to form part of *Art of Islam*, the great synthesis published in 1976, I will limit myself to giving some indications on the books written during the above-mentioned period. As for the articles, they are listed in an anthology of Burckhardt's entitled, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, where the interested reader can trace them without difficulty.[3]

In one of his most widely known books, *Sacred Art in East and West*,[4] Burckhardt analyzes the metaphysical basis of the traditional art forms typical of the great living civilizations and religions: Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism. In chapter IV, "The Foundations of Islamic Art", he observes that "Unity, on which Islam is centered, is not expressible in terms of any image", which explains the "abstract" character of Islamic art. He also dissipates the frequent confusion which is made when this "abstract" character is assimilated with the "abstract

[2] The word "Tradition", generally written with a capital T, is used by authors like Burckhardt and Hossein Nasr—who belong to the so-called "perennialist" or "traditionalist" school of thought—to designate the set of signs, symbols, and teachings that were at all times of history flown down from Heaven to guide men back to their Creator. It is the result of the theophanic irradiation (Arabic *tajallī*) of God's Qualities and Energies, the root of all religions and the universal inciter to the spiritual quest. In relation with art, it is the source of inspiration, the providential instrument by which the artist may respond to the appeal of the divine Beauty.

[3] Translated and edited by William Stoddart (Cambridge, U.K.: Quinta Essentia, 1987). Chapters 21: "The Role of Fine Arts in Moslem Education", 22: "Perennial Values in Islamic Arts", and 23: "The Void in Islamic Art" reflect the deep "pedagogical" preoccupations of the author. A complete bibliography of Titus Burckhardt is also presented as an appendix to *The Essential Titus Burckhardt: Reflections on Sacred Art, Faiths, and Civilizations*, edited by William Stoddart (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003).

[4] Published originally in French under the title *Principes et Méthodes de l'Art sacré* (Lyon: Paul Derain, 1958), it was translated by Lord Northbourne and published as *Sacred Art in East and West* (London: Perennial Books, 1976; second edition Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae/Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2001). See chapter IV, "The Foundations of Islamic Art".

art" as conceived and practiced in the modern West. "The moderns", says Burckhardt, "find in their 'abstractions' a response that is ever more immediate, more fluid, and more individual to the irrational impulses that come from the subconscious; to a Muslim artist on the other hand abstract art is the expression of a law, it manifests as directly as possible Unity in multiplicity…". Reacting against the same widespread misunderstanding, Seyyed Hossein Nasr has already written the following in his Foreword to the present book: "Those who became interested in Islamic art for its so-called 'abstract' nature often did so for the wrong reasons. They thought that Islamic art is abstract in the same sense as modern Western art, whereas the two stand at opposite poles. The result of the one form of abstraction is the glass skyscrapers which scar most modern cities, and the fruit of the other is the Shāh Mosque and the Taj Mahal."

Two books wholly dedicated to the civilization and art of Islam have also been produced at ten-year intervals during the same period. Both illustrate the subtle mastery with which Burckhardt describes how Islam, when it was properly understood and applied as a general Law (*sharīʿa*) and as a way to self-improvement (*tarīqa*) for each believer, has been a powerful incentive to build up and maintain, for centuries, a harmonious environment and way of life in a city (Fez) and in a whole country (Moorish Spain or al-Andalus). In *Fez: City of Islam*,[5] Burckhardt uses the souvenirs and the pictorial material belonging to his early thirties, jointly with documentation gathered during several sojourns in Morocco after the country's Independence (1956), to draw up a remarkable picture of the city which represents a model of human urbanism. As for the book *Moorish Culture in Spain*,[6] it revives, as always with the help of a bright visual documentation and meticulous scientific background, the eight centuries of Arab dominance in Southern Spain, a period of intense intellectual, scientific, and religious interchange between Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

To understand the spirit which has stimulated Burckhardt to dedicate a lifelong attention and care to the diffusion of knowledge on the artistic patrimony of Islam, it suffices to read carefully his brief but substantial Preface to the present book, where he explains how the study of Islamic art—an art whose substance is Beauty, a divine quality—"can lead … to a more or less profound understanding of the spiritual realities that lie at the root of a whole cosmic and human world". These were realities of which Burckhardt had acquired an intimate knowledge, not only through the contemplation of forms of art typical of the Islamic or other religious "languages", but by his continuous contact with the Koranic teachings and the writings of the great sages and mystics—the Sufis—of Islam. A few quotations from the impressions recorded by Seyyed Hossein Nasr when, in 1966, he traveled in the Near East in the company of Burckhardt and visited the tomb of the great Sufi master Ibn ʿArabī in Damascus, testify to the aura that radiated from Burckhardt when he found himself in a propitious ambiance where his contemplative mood was left free to flow inside and around Him:

> We entered the sanctuary reverentially and after offering prayers sat down by the tomb of the great metaphysician and saint which was surrounded by an atmosphere of tranquility and calm. The peace and serenity of this atmosphere were accentuated by

[5] *Fez, Stadt des Islam* published in German in 1960 by Urs Graf Verlag was translated into English by William Stoddart and published in 1992 by Islamic Texts Society, Cambridge, England.

[6] Originally published in German as *Die Maurische Kultur in Spanien* (Munich: Callwey, 1970). An English translation of the book by Alisa Jaffa was published in 1972 (London: Allen & Unwin/New York: McGraw-Hill; second edition Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999).

> the fact that at the moment Titus Burckhardt and I happened to be alone in that sacred place.… I occasionally glanced at the contemplating face of my companion whose closed eyes seemed to gaze inwardly upon the heart and whose face reflected the light of the Intellect before which his mind and soul were so transparent. I thought at that time about Burckhardt's significance in making Ibn ʿArabī known within the Western world… [there follows a list of Burckhardt's principal translations of and commentaries on Ibn ʿArabī's teachings]. In contrast to many who write of Ibn ʿArabī and claim traditional orthodoxy without however having realized the truth of Sufism, Burckhardt lived the truth of which he wrote. The exceptional light of intelligence which emanated from him pierced to the heart of the texts he studied and illuminated their meaning in a manner which is possible only by a person in whom the truth has descended from the plane of the mind to the center of the heart and become fully realized.[7]

Then, after about half a century's intimate relationship with Islam and its arts, Titus Burckhardt rather unexpectedly received an invitation to write a book—the present one—about the artistic creativity and heritage in the Islamic world. This happened in 1975, when a World of Islam Festival of vast purport was being organized in England with the participation of persons and cultural institutions, including universities and museums, capable of contributing to the major objective of the Festival: to familiarize the Western public with the main features of the Islamic culture and with the ways of life of the Muslim peoples around the world, so as to avoid or correct erroneous prejudices and facilitate inter-communal contacts and relationships.

Titus Burckhardt was at that time residing in Fez where, as a UNESCO expert, he had already spent two full years, from 1972 to 1974, inventorying patrician dwellings and old sanctuaries and preparing a set of recommendations for the rehabilitation of the historic city—the Medina—of Fez. His first proposals having been accepted by UNESCO and the Moroccan Government, an international team of experts and technicians was convened in Fez and given as its headquarters a traditional building—seat of an ancient Tribunal—situated in a quiet district of the Medina. The mandate of the team (Atelier du Schéma Directeur d'Urbanisme de Fès, ASDUF) was to work out a Master Plan for the future development of the whole built-up area of Fez, including the historic Medina, the New Fez (Fez Jedid) built by the Merinids in the fourteenth century A.D. and containing the Royal Palace, and the New City built during the French Protectorate at a distance of about one mile from the Medina. The team was headed by Professor Aksora, from the University of Ankara, while Titus Burckhardt held the charge of Cultural Adviser for the project. The team comprised a group of Moroccan citizens—including several architects, a geographer, an economist, a sociologist—and specialists of various nationalities: a Swiss architect and town-planner (Stefano Bianca), an Italian restorer, a draughtsman from France, and others—a landscape gardener, sanitary engineer, etc.—who were called for short missions. When the request from England arrived, Burckhardt—who had much to do with the daily consultations and internal meetings of the team—was somewhat hesitant to ac-

[7] "With Titus Burckhardt at the Tomb of Ibn ʿArabī", from the Titus Burckhardt Memorial Issue in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 16, Nos. 1 and 2, Winter-Spring 1984 (Bedfont: Perennial Books). The same issue contains an article by Jean-Louis Michon entitled, "Titus Burckhardt in Fez, 1972-1977", where are recalled some of the circumstances which surrounded our nominations and respective missions as co-experts of UNESCO for the preservation of the cultural heritage of Morocco.

cept the proposal but finally agreed to write the book, feeling that the subject deserved being treated as an integral part of his mission.

Let us now hear of a moving and truthful set of souvenirs that Stefano Bianca, the Swiss member of ASDUF, who had received from Burckhardt a whole instruction on the principles and forms of Islamic art when he was a young architect, and later again when he was planning a dissertation on the interaction between cultural patterns and urban form in the Islamic world, presented on the occasion of an international Colloquium on Islamic Arts held in Marrakesh in May 1999 as a homage to Titus Burckhardt:[8]

> A decisive turn in our relations came about during the mid-seventies, when I was able to work side by side with Titus Burckhardt for almost three years on the conservation plan for the old city of Fez. He had been requested by UNESCO in 1972 or 1973 to set up an inventory of the architectural heritage of Fez. Realizing that recording alone was not sufficient, he advocated the establishment of a full-fledged master-plan for the complete city of Fez, in order to provide a realistic framework for the conservation of the old city. Upon his initial recommendation, I became a member of the enlarged interdisciplinary team of UNESCO consultants entrusted with this task from 1975 to 1978.
>
> Titus Burckhardt's decision to give five to six years of his life to the cause of Fez was certainly driven by a feeling of gratitude and debt to a country and a city to which he owed so much of his spiritual development during the late thirties and early forties. Beyond that, I believe it was also motivated by a challenging vision—the vision that Fez, arguably the best preserved and still living example of a historic Islamic city, could become a model for how to perpetuate and evolve the traditional urban form without losing its essential qualities. Although a committed conservationist, he was realistic enough to understand that concessions had to be made to contemporary needs in order to preserve and restore the viability of the old city. Yet he was ready to fight against a certain type of modernization which simply imposes alien models and procedures without evaluating their impact and without adapting their physical structure to local needs and conditions. His thinking in this respect, often expressed with striking lucidity and poignant realism, provided precious guidance to the team of professional architects and planners. . . .
>
> In all these years, and although everybody would gladly have conceded him any privilege, Titus Burckhardt worked as a most conscientious and reliable member of the team, always available when and where he was needed. Only after some time did I discover that beside this full work load, he had still found the energy, in his free time, to work on the preparations of the "World of Islam Festival" held in 1976 (he was one of the leading forces behind this event) and to write his book *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*.

[8] The proceedings of this colloquium were published with the support of UNESCO, Center of the World Heritage, in a volume entitled *Sagesse et Splendeur des Arts Islamiques—Hommage à Titus Burckhardt* (Marrakesh: Al Quobba Zarqua, 2000), with 140 pages of French text and 235 pages of Arabic text. Bianca's article was translated from French into English and published under the title, "Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984): A Personal Recollection", in *Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1999, dedicated to Martin Lings and Titus Burckhardt.

> It was during these years in Fez that I had an opportunity of getting to know him better through our joint work, and to observe some of his many ways of interacting with others. It was gratifying and sometimes amusing to see how he commanded the respect even of those who had little in common with him or took fundamentally different positions. His introspective nature did not prevent him from being an astute negotiator, and even to return shrewdness, if this was necessary, to defend his vision and the good cause. Rarely did he embark in argumentative discussions, but a single flash-like observation, drawn from an area unfamiliar or unsuspected to his partners, would often make their arguments collapse or expose the poorness of their premises. Sometimes he would also surprise the architects of the team with his ability to visualize his concepts through excellent free-hand sketches. Few, if any, knew that being the son of a sculptor, he also was a gifted artist with an innate sense for creative processes—a sensitivity which, combined with his knowledge of esoteric traditions, allowed him to gain such incomparable access to craftsmanship as the base of Islamic art. . . .

"The distinctive sign of a spiritual master is his awareness of the relativity of forms—as well as of their necessity. Only a man whose knowledge transcends forms knows what forms involve." With these simple words Titus Burckhardt has well defined his own approach and the criteria against which he emerges as one of the few real masters in a time and a place where spiritual realities are often usurped and perverted for other motives, if not deliberately ignored.

Recently I was asked by a journalist preparing an article on Titus Burckhardt whether I felt that his works have withstood the test of time and whether they were still of relevance. This question surprised me, because I had never thought of Titus Burckhardt's works as part of a trend or "fashion" subject to a specific period. If anything, they are distinguished by their quest for timeless values, and to the extent they have succeeded in that endeavor they have themselves acquired a timeless quality, which remains open and accessible to those who search for it.

I arrive now at the point where, having roughly reconstituted one of the tracks—the track of art—that Burckhardt has explored with a special insistence and on which he has guided many seekers of Truth and aspirants to Beauty, I might have some comments to make on the contents of his book *Art of Islam*. In fact, I feel that nothing has to be added to his invaluable teachings and that the reader has to be left the responsibility of discerning what, in these teachings, is fundamental and may eventually constitute a solid theoretical basis (*scientia*) for action (*ars*), e.g. for the launching of a campaign of conservation of the artistic heritage or of training in traditional handicrafts. At every page of Burckhardt's *Art of Islam*, and with the splendid illustrations accompanying the text, we are reminded that art is not only the expression of a formal language by which man proves his creativity, but it is an answer to a necessity decreed by the Creator who delegated to the human being a part of His Power and Wisdom. *Ars sine scientia nihil* ("technique [or skill] without knowledge [or wisdom] counts for nothing"): this adage from the Middle Ages is, for Burckhardt, the major theme, the motor that incites him to recall this first truth to his contemporaries and help them to taste with him, through the art forms of the great civilizations, the omnipresence of the One Divinity.

Jean-Louis Michon

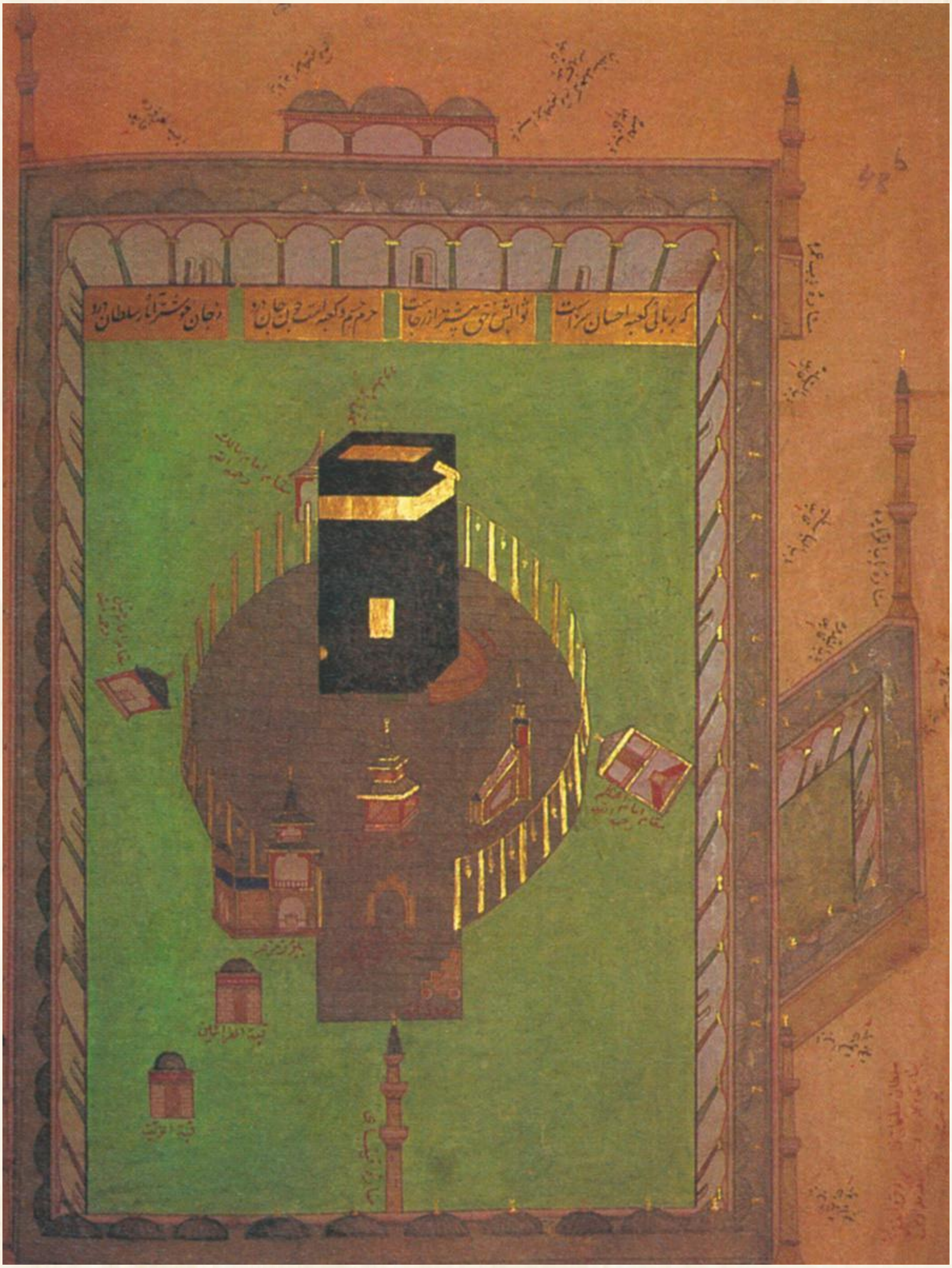
Preface

If one were to reply to the question "what is Islam?" by simply pointing to one of the masterpieces of Islamic art such as, for example, the Mosque of Córdoba, or that of Ibn Ṭūlūn in Cairo, or one of the *madrasahs* in Samarqand or even the Taj Mahal, that reply, summary as it is, would be nonetheless valid, for the art of Islam expresses what its name indicates, and it does so without ambiguity. Granted that its modes of expression vary according to the ethnic surroundings and the passing of the centuries—though more upon the former than the latter—they are nearly always satisfying, as much from the aesthetic point of view as from that of their spiritual aim: they involve no disharmony, and the same cannot be asserted of all domains of Islamic culture. Theology itself—we are speaking not of the Koran but of the human science that flows out from it—is not free from contradictions, and the entire social order, although linked to a law perfect in itself, is no more than, at best, a series of approximations. Aside from esoterism, which is none other than the "wisdom of the saints" and is situated on quite another plane, art appears to have the privilege of being always in conformity with the spirit of Islam, at least in its central manifestations such as sacred architecture and provided it is not subject to such deleterious foreign influences as lie at the root of Ottoman baroque or to the far more deadly impact of modern technology, which destroys Islamic art by destroying its human base, namely craftsmanship, whose heritage is built on skill and wisdom.

It is not surprising, nor strange, that the most outward manifestation of a religion or civilization like Islam—and art is by definition an exteriorization—should reflect in its own fashion what is most inward in that civilization. The substance of art is beauty; and this, in Islamic terms, is a divine quality and as such has a double aspect: in the world, it is appearance; it is the garb which, as it were, clothes beautiful beings and beautiful things; in God, however, or in itself, it is pure inward beatitude; it is the divine quality which, among all the divine qualities manifested in the world, most directly recalls pure Being.

This is to say that the study of Islamic art, or any other sacred art, can lead, when it is undertaken with a certain open-mindedness, to a more or less profound understanding of the spiritual realities that lie at the root of a whole cosmic and human world. Viewed in this way, the "history of art" surpasses the level of history pure and simple, if only because it asks the question: "whence comes the beauty of the world, of which we have just spoken, and whence comes its absence in a world which today threatens to cover the face of the whole earth?"

Titus Burckhardt



1. Turkish miniature from the manuscript *Le Livre des Rois* representing the Kaʿba in Mecca, 16th century

Chapter I

Prologue: The Kaʿba

We shall begin our investigations into the art of Islam with a description of the Kaʿba and its liturgical role, the literally central importance of which for Islamic art, and above all for its architecture, is quite clear. As is well known, every Muslim faces the Kaʿba to recite the canonical prayers, and every mosque is accordingly orientated in this direction; in the subsequent chapters we shall demonstrate everything that follows from this.

There is a further reason for speaking about the Kaʿba at the beginning of this book. It is the only worked object that plays an obligatory part in Muslim worship. If it is not a work of art in the proper sense of the term—being no more than a simple cube of masonry—it belongs rather to what might be termed "proto-art", whose spiritual dimension corresponds to myth or revelation, depending on the point of view. This means that the inherent symbolism of the Kaʿba, in its shape and the rites associated with it, contains in embryo everything expressed by the sacred art of Islam.

The Kaʿba's role as the liturgical center of the Muslim world is bound up with the fact that it demonstrates Islam's link with the Abrahamic tradition and thereby with the origin of all the monotheist religions. According to the Koran, the Kaʿba was built by Abraham and his son Ishmael, and it was Abraham who established the yearly pilgrimage to this sanctuary. Center and origin: here are the two aspects of one and the same spiritual reality, or again, one could say, the two fundamental options of every spirituality.[1]

For the generality of Muslims, to pray facing the Kaʿba—or facing Mecca, which comes to the same thing—expresses *a priori* a choice: by this gesture, the Muslim is distinguished both from the Jews, who pray facing Jerusalem, and the Christians who "orientate" themselves literally by facing the sunrise; he elects to join the "religion of the center", which is like the tree from which the other religions stem. "Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian", says the Koran, "but detached (*ḥanīf*) and submitting (*muslim*)…" (3:67). The impact of these words is that the faith of Abraham—who is here the very typification of a Muslim—is free from the specializations and limitations represented, in Muslim eyes, by the Jewish concept of a people chosen to the exclusion of all others, and by the Christian dogma of a unique savior, the Son of God.

Let us note that the Koranic account of the building of the Kaʿba by Abraham does not stress his role as ancestor of the Arabs—his descendants through Ishmael and Hagar—but his function as the apostle of the pure and universal monotheism that Islam purposes to renew. Whatever the historical basis[2] of this account, it is inconceivable that the Prophet should have invented it for more or less political motives, apart from questions of sincerity. The pre-Islamic Arabs were obsessed with genealogy—which is, in any case, a characteristic of nomads—and would never have accepted the "interpolation" of a hitherto unknown ancestor.[3] If the Bible makes no reference to a sanctuary founded by Abraham and Ishmael in Arabia, this is because it had no cause to refer to a sanctuary placed outside the land and destiny of Israel. It nevertheless recognized the spiritual destiny of the Ishmaelites by including them in God's promise to Abraham. Let us note finally—without straying too far from our subject—that it is typical of a divine "geometry", which is both strict and unforeseeable, to

make use of an Abrahamic sanctuary lost in the desert and forgotten by the great religious communities of the time, in order to have a starting point for renewing monotheism of a Semitic complexion.[4] The question so many students of Islam ask themselves: "What happened at Mecca to bring about a new religion?", could well be put the other way round: "For what reasons did the new, nascent religion first manifest itself in this spot?"

The eminently archaic form of the Mecca sanctuary accords well with the Abrahamic origin attributed to it. It has, indeed, been frequently destroyed and rebuilt, but the very name Kaʿba, which means "cube", is a warrant that its shape has not been essentially modified; it is slightly irregular, being twelve meters long, ten meters broad and about sixteen meters high.

The building is traditionally covered with a "vesture" (*kiswah*) which is changed yearly and which has, since the Abbasid period, been made of black cloth embroidered with gold lettering, which bespeaks in striking fashion the both abstract and mysterious aspect of the edifice. The custom of "clothing" the sanctuary was apparently introduced by an ancient Himyarite king, and seems to be part of an extremely venerable Semitic tradition which is, in any case, alien in style to the Greco-Roman world: to "clothe" a house is, in a way, to treat it as a living body or as an ark bearing a spiritual influence, and that is how the Arabs understood it. As for the celebrated black stone, it is enclosed not in the center of the Kaʿba but in an outer wall close to its meridian angle. It is a meteorite, and therefore a stone fallen from heaven, and the Prophet did no more than confirm its sacred character.[5] Finally, let us mention the outer precinct, roughly circular, of the *ḥaram*, which forms part of the sanctuary.

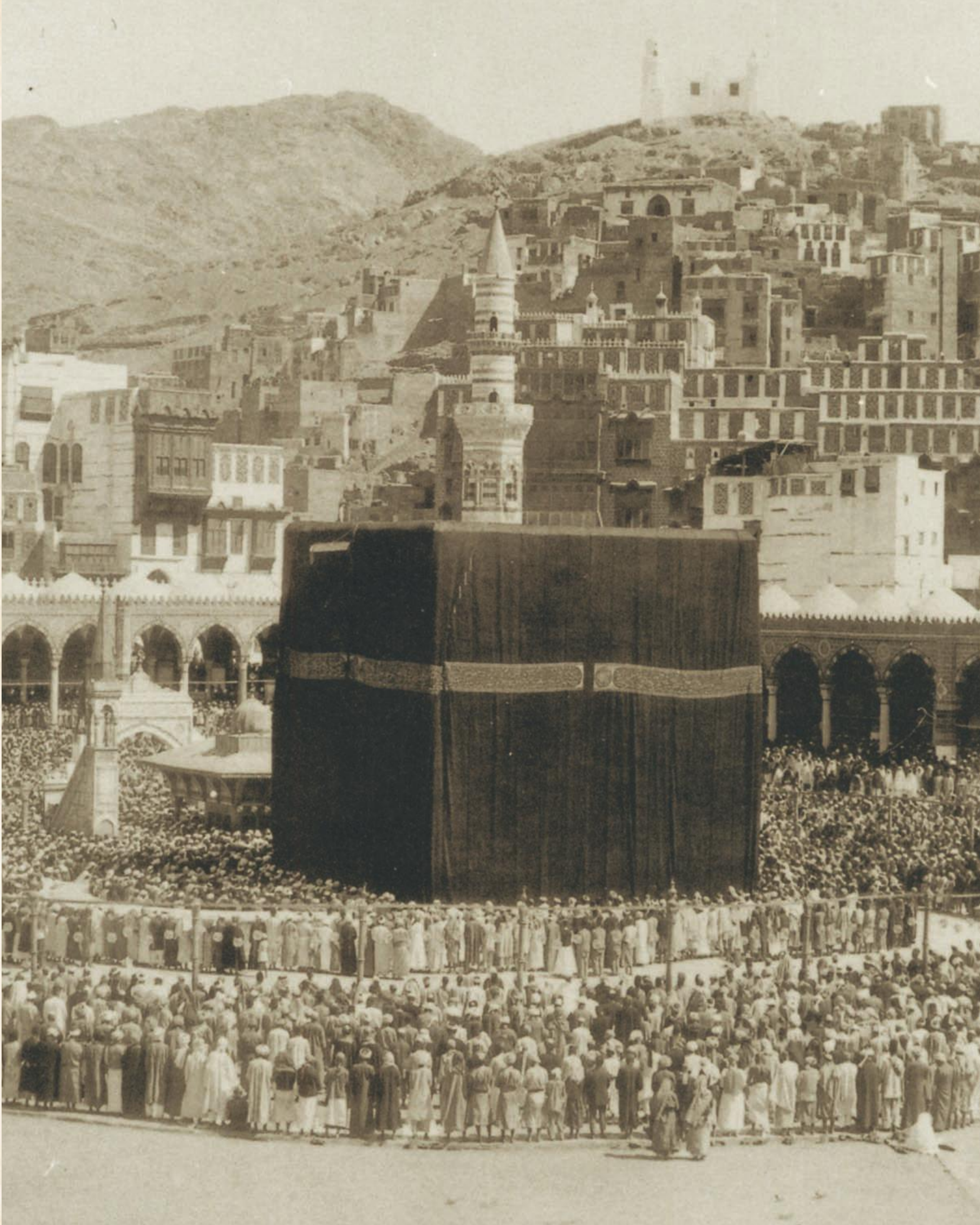
The Kaʿba is the only Islamic sanctuary which can be compared to a temple. It is commonly called the "house of God" (*baytu ʾLlāh*), and it has in fact the character of a "divine dwelling", paradoxical as this may seem in a Muslim climate, where the idea of divine transcendence outweighs everything. But God "dwells", as it were, in the ungraspable center of the world, as he "dwells" in the innermost center of man. It will be recalled that the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem which was likewise a divine "habitation", had the shape of a cube, like the Kaʿba. The Holy of Holies, or *debir*, contained the Ark of the Covenant, whereas the interior of the Kaʿba is empty;[6] it contains only a curtain, which oral tradition calls the "curtain of Divine Mercy (*Raḥmah*)".

The cube is linked to the idea of the center, since it is a crystalline synthesis of the whole of space, each face of the cube corresponding to one of the primary directions, namely the zenith, the nadir, and the four cardinal points. Let us remember, even so, that the positioning of the Kaʿba does not entirely correspond to this scheme, because it is the four corners, and not the sides of the Kaʿba, which face the cardinal points, doubtless because the cardinal points mean, in the Arab concept, the four "corner pillars" (*arkān*) of the universe.[7]

The center of the terrestrial world is the point intersected by the "axis" of heaven: the rite of circumambulation (*ṭawāf*), around the Kaʿba, which is to be found in one form or other in the majority of ancient sanctuaries,[8] is then seen to reproduce the rotation of heaven around its polar axis. Naturally, these are not the interpretations attributed by Islam to these ritual elements, but are inherent *a priori* in a view of things shared by all the religions of antiquity.

The "axial" character of the Kaʿba is, however, affirmed by a well-known Muslim legend, according to which the "ancient house", first built by Adam, then destroyed by the flood and rebuilt by Abraham, is situated at the lower extremity of an axis which traverses all the heavens; at the level of each heavenly world, another sanctuary, frequented by angels, marks this same axis, the supreme prototype of each of these sanctuaries being God's throne, around which circulates the chorus of the heavenly

Opposite: **2.** The Kaʿba at Mecca



spirits; but it would be more exact to say that they circulate within it, since the divine throne encloses all creation.

This legend bears clear witness to the relationship which exists between ritual "orientation" and Islam as submission or abandonment (*islām*) to the Divine Purpose. The fact of turning in prayer to a single point, ungraspable as such but situated on earth and analogous, in its singleness, to the center of every world, is eloquent of the integration of human will in the Universal Will: "and to God are all things returned" (Koran 3:109). At the same time, it will be seen that there is a difference between this symbolism and that of Christian worship, where the point of orientation is that part of the sky where the sun, the image of Christ reborn, rises at Easter. This means that all orientated churches have parallel axes, whereas the axes of all the mosques in the world converge.

The convergence of all the gestures of adoration upon a single point becomes apparent, however, only in the proximity of the Kaʿba, when the host of believers bows down in common prayer from all sides towards a single center; there is perhaps no more immediate and tangible expression of Islam.[9]

It will have been gathered that the liturgy of Islam is linked to the Kaʿba in two different but complementary modes, one static and the other dynamic: the first mode means that every place on earth is directly attached to the Meccan center, and it is in this sense that the Prophet said, "God has blessed my community by giving them the face of the whole world as a sanctuary". The center of this unique sanctuary is the Kaʿba, and the believer, who prays in the universal sanctuary, finds that all distance is momentarily abolished. The second mode, which is dynamic in nature, is made manifest in the pilgrimage, which every Muslim must make at least once in his lifetime, if he is able. There is an aspect of divestment in the pilgrimage, and this ordinarily transmits itself to the entire Islamic ambience; at the same time, its impact on the believer is that of a dramatic recapitulation of his *islām*: arriving at the threshold of the sacred area surrounding Mecca, the pilgrim divests himself of all his clothing, purifies himself with water from head to toe, and garbs himself in two pieces of seamless cloth, one around his waist and the other over one shoulder. It is in this "consecrated" state (*iḥrām*) that he approaches the Kaʿba to accomplish the rite of circumambulation (*ṭawāf*), ceaselessly invoking God. Only after this visit to the "house of God" does he set out for the various places associated with sacred history, and completes his peregrination by sacrificing a ram in memory of Abraham's sacrifice.[10]

We shall see later how these two modes of adoration, the one static and the other dynamic, are reflected at different levels in the world of Islam. In the present context we wish to show only one thing, namely, that the Muslim soul and, thereby, Muslim art are grounded in a world that is closer to that of the Old Testament Patriarchs than to the Greco-Roman universe, to which Islam had to turn for the first elements of its art. Let us not forget that Islam was born in a "no man's land" between two great civilizations, the Byzantine and the Persian, which were at the same time empires disputing Arabia, and which Islam had to fight and overcome for its own survival. Compared with these two worlds, both of which had an artistic heritage[11] tending towards naturalism and rationalism, the Kaʿba and its associated rites are like an anchor cast in a timeless deep.

When the Prophet had conquered Mecca, he went first to the sacred enclosure and performed the circumambulation of the Kaʿba on camelback. The pagan Arabs had surrounded this area with a girdle of 360 idols, one for each day of the lunar year. Touching these idols with his riding stick, the Prophet overturned them one after the other, while reciting the verse from the Koran, "Truth has come; vanity has vanished; in truth vanity is evanescent" (17:81).



3. Detail of embroidery with lettering from a *kiswah* (vesture of the Kaʿba)

He was then handed the key of the Kaʿba and went in. The inner walls were adorned with paintings executed by a Byzantine artist on the orders of the Kaʿba's pagan masters; they portrayed scenes from the life of Abraham and certain idolatrous customs. There was also a representation of the Holy Virgin and Child. Protecting this icon of the Holy Virgin with both hands, the Prophet ordered that all the others be effaced. The icon of the Virgin was later destroyed by a fire.[12] This traditional story demonstrates the meaning and the scale of what is erroneously called "Muslim iconoclasm", and which we would rather call "aniconism": if the Kaʿba is the heart of man, the idols, which inhabited it, represent the passions which invest the heart and impede the remembrance of God. Therefore, the destruction of idols—and, by extension, the putting aside of every image likely to become an idol—is the clearest possible parable for Islam of the "one thing necessary", which is the purification of the heart for the sake of *tawḥīd*, the bearing of witness or the awareness that "there is no divinity save God".

To create a new Muslim iconography would be superfluous after such an example and would deprive the parable of its meaning. In Islam, icons are replaced by sacred writing which is, as it were, the visible embodiment of the Divine Word.

Notes to Chapter I

1. “The whole existence of the peoples of antiquity, and of traditional peoples in general, is dominated by two presiding ideas, the idea of Center and the idea of Origin” (Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* [London: Perennial Books, 1965], p. 7).

2. It is possible for a sacred story to be more true—in the sense of having a greater reality—than a purely empirical or historical account of the events.

3. See Y. Moubarac, *Abraham in the Quran*, coll. Ètudes musulmanes (Paris: Vrin, 1958).

4. There are forms of monotheism which lie outside Semitic or Abrahamic lineage.

5. For all the peoples of antiquity, a stone fallen from the sky could not be other than sacred, and necessarily so, for things are what they mean.

6. This is true also of the “cell” of certain Hindu temples, and this “cell” or matrix (*gharbagriha*) has also the shape of a cube.

7. St. John’s Apocalypse describes the Heavenly Jerusalem as an imperishable synthesis of the world in the shape of a cube.

8. Notably in Hinduism and Buddhism, but also in medieval Christianity, in the form of processions around a saint’s tomb.

9. Inside the Kaʿba there is no more ritual “orientation”; the difference between each convergent direction is annulled, and the custom of the Prophet requires that four brief prayers be made, facing each side of the sanctuary in turn. Thus it is that in the world’s spiritual center, the contrasts or oppositions which typify the world are no longer dominating but dominated.

According to a Sufi interpretation, the Kaʿba corresponds to the heart as the seat of the Divine “Presence”, and the encircling movement of the pilgrims around the Kaʿba recalls the movement of thoughts or meditations turning perpetually around the soul’s ungraspable center.

10. The great pilgrimage moves across the Islamic world as the circulation of the blood moves through man’s body, the Kaʿba being the heart.

11. This heritage cropped up occasionally in Europe and, with the Renaissance, finished by engulfing the fundamentally Christian civilization of the Middle Ages.

12. According to al-Azraqī, the author of the oldest history of Mecca. The icon portrayed the Holy Virgin with the Infant on her knees.

Chapter II
The Birth of Islamic Art

1 The Second "Revelation"

In considering the history of Muslim art, the first question to arise is the following: how was it possible for this art to be born almost overnight, about a century after the Prophet's death—at the conclusion, that is, of the greater conquests of Islam—and to display almost immediately a completely convincing unity of form that would maintain itself over the centuries? It is perhaps only Buddhist art that has a comparable homogeneity and continuity despite all the ethnic differences within its area of dispersion. But the unity of Buddhist art is explicable as a logical unfolding, in painting, sculpture, and architecture, of certain basic symbols such as the icon of the Buddha in various attitudes of meditation or teaching, the lotus as the image of the soul opening up to the transcendent light, the *mandala* as a symbolic synthesis of the universe, and so on. The art of Islam, on the other hand, is abstract, and its forms are not derived directly from the Koran or from the sayings of the Prophet; they are seemingly without scriptural foundation, while undeniably possessing a profoundly Islamic character.

Nascent Islam knew no art in the proper sense, nor could it, since its original ambience was nomadic or semi-nomadic existence in all its stark simplicity. Admittedly, Arab traders and caravan leaders were in contact with the civilizations of Byzantium and Persia and even India. But most of the works of art they could admire on their travels remained alien to their vital needs; they were interested only in weapons, trinkets, and cloth. At home they retained the forms of ancient, pastoral life. It was, one might say, a barbarian setting which, however, was to be ennobled by the Prophet's example: this made it into a support for spiritual poverty and for a type of dignity that was both virile and priestly. The soil of Arabia, in its majestic monotony, was fitted by Providence for an existence entirely centered on *tawḥīd*, the consciousness of Divine Unity.

It was, in fact, abandonment of the primitive Arabian environment and confrontation with the artistic heritage of the newly conquered or converted sedentary peoples that necessitated the creation of an art conformable to Islam, and enabled it to come about. But before this, there was something of an hiatus or a period of apparent sterility, which can doubtless be explained in terms of the economy of the forces which imposed the great conquests. The new religion spread with the swiftness of a prairie fire, sending its elite troops to the borders of the ancient empire of Alexander the Great and beyond. The conquerors, still Arabs for the most part and of Bedouin stock, had hardly time, in any event, to settle down in a conquered land; they remained strangers, forming a kind of aristocratic caste, who kept the conquered populations at a distance, and had no use for art except as pleasurable spoils; they certainly had no thought of creating it themselves. But after the first phase of stabilization, towards the end of the Umayyad period, the question of art became very real. At that moment, the urbanized population of Syria, where the new center of empire was situated, had for the most part become Muslim; they could not go on living in urban surroundings bearing the ubiquitous stamp of Greco-Roman civilization, only partly modified by the triumph of Christianity. To the religious feeling of the collectivity, the existence of the grandiose Byzantine churches was a kind of defiance; the victory of Islam had to be

made discernible. That is at least the political and psychological aspect of the situation, which must not be confused with the true source of Islamic art: a collective reaction, of an inevitably sentimental nature, cannot engender an art with an inner equilibrium that has defied the centuries.

We would be tempted, in considering the essence of this art, to speak of a second "revelation", were it not necessary to restrict this term to direct and fundamental manifestations of the Divine on earth. We mean that the birth of a sacred art—and the art of Islam deserves this epithet—necessarily corresponds to a providential exteriorization of what is most inward in tradition, and hence the close link between sacred art and esoterism. The appearance of such an art then recalls the sudden crystallization of a supersaturated solution, to use a simile capable of various applications and which, in this case, suggests not only the suddenness of the phenomenon but also the regularity and homogeneity of the resulting forms. The state of supersaturation which precedes the crystals' precipitation does in a way prompt a comparison with the psychological tension, referred to above, occasioned by the primitive Muslim community's meeting the culture of the conquered peoples, but that is no more than an appearance and a superficial aspect of things for, in reality, this supersaturation is none other than the creative potentiality inherent in the tradition.

2 The Dome of the Rock

The Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat aṣ-Ṣakhrah*) at Jerusalem, which was built between 688 and 692 A.D., about 60 years after the Prophet's death, and is the most ancient Muslim monument surviving in a state of complete preservation, still belongs to Byzantine art, at the same time as being a work of Muslim art in the choice of its constituent elements. The Great Mosque of Damascus, started in 706 and finished in 715 is, on the other hand, *a priori* a work of Islamic art, at least in its major forms if not in the details. After this date, and more precisely towards the middle of the eighth century A.D., the new art was to expand very rapidly and on a broad front; the great works which then emerge out of the darkness of time, such as the Great Mosque of Córdoba, founded in 785, and that of Ibn Ṭūlūn in Cairo, finished in 879, no longer represent phases in a still tentative evolution but are, in their quality as art, unsurpassable masterpieces. This means that Islamic art had, by the middle of the second century of the Hegira, found its own language.

Let us briefly compare these dates with those provided by the history of Christian art: the Catacomb paintings, done during the first three centuries A.D., are Christian in subject, though somewhat disguised; their style reflects decadent Roman art. It is not until the age of Constantine that Christian art acquires its own language while retaining, in its Imperial setting, something of the typically Greco-Roman vocabulary, as can be seen at Ravenna; strictly speaking, Christian art did not become entirely itself until after the onset of Byzantine iconoclasm, parallel therefore to the upsurge of Muslim art and, in a curious way, as a reaction to it. In the case of Islam, the cohesion of the religious and social orders were favorable to the swift flowering of art.

The Dome of the Rock is sometimes called the "Mosque of ʿUmar", but this is inaccurate, since it was founded, not by ʿUmar, but by the Umayyad Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik in 688 A.D. However, there is a grain of truth in attributing it to ʿUmar. When this Companion of the Prophet came to Jerusalem at the invitation of the Greek Patriarch, in order to sign the treaty of surrender of the holy city, he asked to be led to the place where Solomon's temple had stood, and whither, according to Muslim belief, the Prophet had been miraculously carried on the night of his ascension to Heaven. It is said that the place was choked with debris and filth which had been strewn there by the

Christian inhabitants to spite the Jews.[1] ʿUmar recognized the place from the way the Prophet had described it to him, and set about tidying it with his own hands.[2] A simple house of Muslim prayer was, after this, built in wood between the rock which forms the summit of Mount Moriah and the place where the al-Aqṣā mosque would later be erected. As for the dome which covers the sacred rock itself, this was built by the Umayyad caliph during the period when Mecca had fallen into the hands of his rival Ibn az-Zubayr in order to enable the faithful to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem in place of Mecca, from which pilgrims were temporarily barred. The rock is, in fact, sacred to Muslims for three reasons: in memory of Abraham, who betook himself to Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son; because of Solomon's temple, whose Holy of Holies had stood upon this spot;[3] and because the Prophet Muḥammad had been carried there on his "night journey". There is a cave beneath the rock, which leads to a kind of well opening out towards the top; according to a popular tradition, it was from this cave and through this well that the Prophet ascended to the sky, and this is, in any case, a striking piece of symbolism: the cave under the rock is like the heart or innermost conscience of man, joined by the "heavenly ray" to the higher worlds.

The Dome of the Rock, designed to shelter this sacred site as if beneath a vast canopy, is architecturally quite unique in the art of Islam and is directly linked to the style of the Byzantine sanctuary with a central cupola and



4. The Dome of the Rock viewed from the south-west, with the Mount of Olives in the background



Figure 1. Section of Santa Constanza in Rome

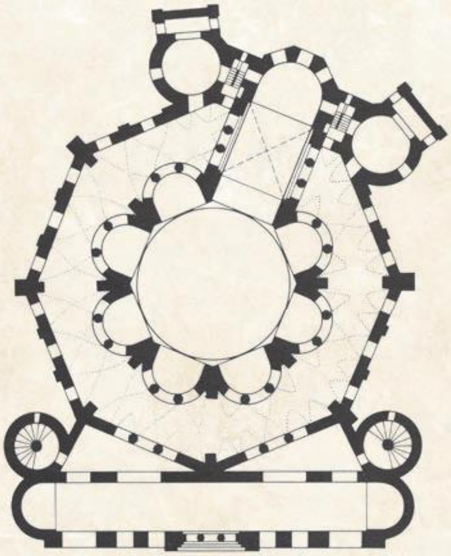


Figure 2. Plan of Saint Vitalis in Ravenna

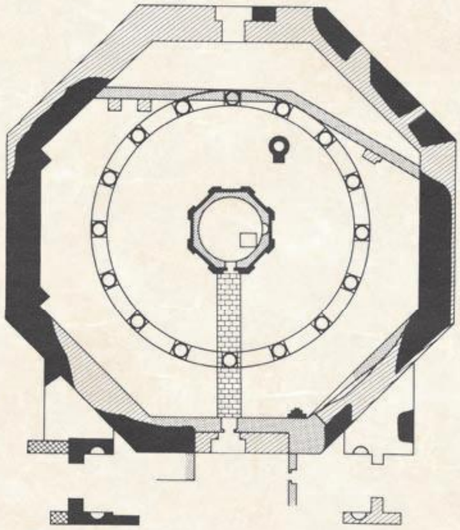


Figure 3. Plan of the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem

an octagonal deambulatory; it has even the appearance of being the logical and definitive outcome of an entire evolution of Roman and Byzantine architecture, of which various examples, not vastly different from this, are to be found in the area of Palestine.[4] But it was only in a Muslim climate that this type of building could assert itself in all its "Platonic" purity. Early buildings of the same type were made somewhat more complicated by static considerations and liturgical requirements; the need to strengthen the supports of the cupola and to extend the inner space for the choir meant that the various geometrical elements comprising the building had all to be blended in a single body, whereas the Muslim sanctuary owes all its beauty to the contrasting articulation of these same elements, namely the hemisphere of the cupola on its circular drum and the crystalline octagon that surrounds it. The cupola is made of a double casing in wood, covered with a layer of gilded metal, in such a way that there is no need for clumsy buttresses; it has a more soaring sweep than Byzantine cupolas. One feels

that here for the first time a cupola acquires all the radiant strength that is characteristic of so much Islamic architecture. The walls of the octagon, now ornamented with Turkish ceramic tiles, were formerly covered with mosaics. Four portals open out onto the four cardinal points, thus placing the building symbolically at the center of the world.

The interior of the sanctuary feels more Byzantine or Roman than the exterior, because of the use of antique columns partly linked with architraves. The light falls from above across the drum of the cupola, which is adorned with mosaics on a gold ground, and illuminates the sacred rock. The rock is surrounded by four pillars and twelve columns which support the drum and invite ritual circumambulation. A second, and larger, series of pillars and columns is arranged octagonally and in such a way that the space remains orientated everywhere towards the center, without being drawn into the circular movement. The secret of this transmutation of movement into repose lies in the fact that the bases of all the pillars are situated on the intersecting points of a star-shaped polygon formed by two squares traced in the center circle. The result is that the various groups of pillars mark out square or rectangular areas, whose proportions are all governed by the correspondence which exists between the sides of a square and its diagonal, or, again, between the diameter of the circle inscribed within a square and the diameter of the circle outside it; this correspondence cannot be expressed in whole numbers, but it is profoundly "organic". Thus, the very plan of the sanctuary expresses the synthesis of the circle and the square, movement and repose, time and space, and this synthesis is already expressed, in the most striking fashion, by the exterior shape of the building in which the "celestial" sphere of the dome marries the "earthly" crystal of the octagon.[5]

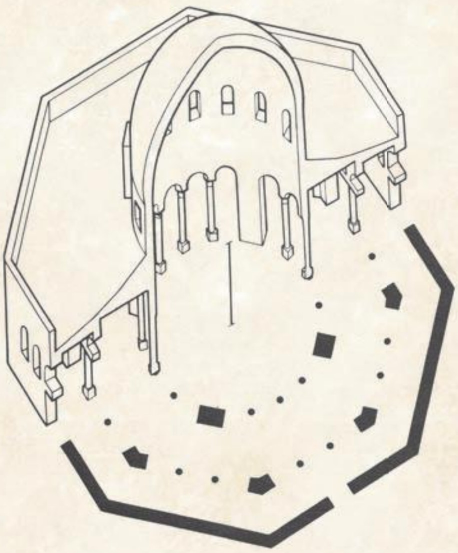


Figure 4. Perspective of the Dome of the Rock

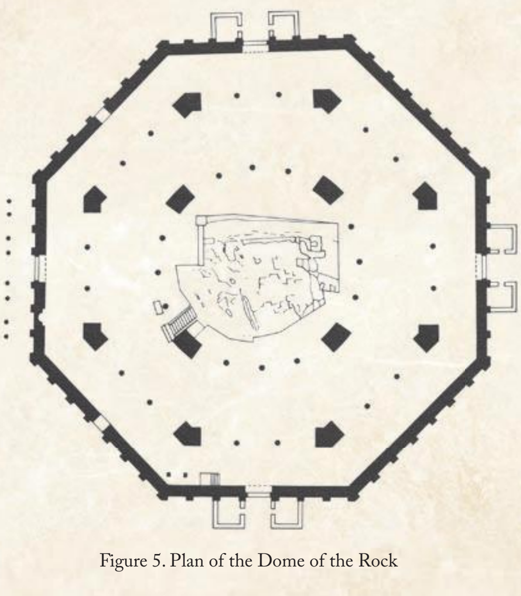


Figure 5. Plan of the Dome of the Rock

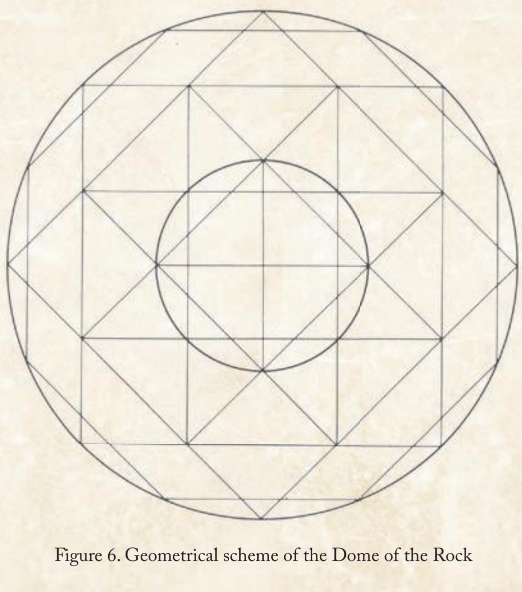


Figure 6. Geometrical scheme of the Dome of the Rock





Top: **5**. Interior of the Dome of the Rock
Bottom: **6**. Dome of the Rock. View of the Sacred Rock, taken from the eastern side of the gallery at the base of the Dome

It is possible, and even likely, that the plan based on a star-shaped polygon is a Byzantine legacy which, in its turn, has a Platonic and Pythagorean antecedent in antiquity. The star-shaped, eight-pointed polygon was to play a fundamental role in Muslim art and would appear not only in architectural art but also in decorative motifs. In practice, the use of thematic planning of this kind enabled an architectural plan to be transposed from one scale to another without recourse to very exact units of measurement. At the same time, this application to architecture of a qualitative—and not a purely quantitative—geometry, has a speculative, and even contemplative, aspect; it is the art of combining the multiple and the diverse with unity. If proof were necessary for the continuation of an element of ancient gnosis in Islamic art, it is here that it is to be found.

There is no doubt that the builders of the Dome of the Rock saw in it an image of the spiritual center of the world; granted that this center is symbolized, for Muslims, by the Kaʿba, nevertheless Jerusalem, and Mount Moriah in particular, has always been considered as an avatar of this same center and also as the place where the decisive events at the end of time would unfold. The drum of the cupola is held up by four pillars and twelve columns, and the deambulatory has eight pillars and sixteen columns, making a total of forty supports, which corresponds to the number of saints who, according to a saying of the Prophet, constitute the spiritual "pillars" of the world in every age. The arrangement of the four portals facing the four cardinal points of space has been mentioned already.

It remains to say a few words about the mosaics which adorn the interior of the drum of the dome. These consist of ornaments of vines, stylized and enriched with jewels and diadems, in which Sasanid and Byzantine emblems can be discerned, in allusion, perhaps, to Islam's universal empire. This assembly of plants and jewels has something specifically Asiatic about it; it has certain analogies with the sacred



Figure 7. Emblems and jewels in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock

ornaments of Hinduism and Buddhism; at the same time, they remind us of the garlands which the ancient Arabs used to hang on sanctuaries as offerings.

The mosaic-workers had undoubtedly been trained in a Syrian-Byzantine school. It should be noted, however, that the decorations of the Dome of the Rock include no representations of animate beings, and this does nothing to support the thesis of certain orientalists that Islam did not reject anthropomorphic images until a much later age.

Taken as a whole, the Dome of the Rock amply demonstrates the meeting-point between Byzantine and nascent Islamic art, and this meeting was made possible by virtue of the "Platonic" element inherent in Byzantine art; by this, we mean a certain aspect of contemplative wisdom, which integrates quite naturally with the Islamic perspective oriented on the unity of God both transcendent and immanent.

3 *The Umayyads*

The Umayyad period (661-750) produced a frankly profane and worldly art, the like of which was never to be seen again on Islamic soil where there is normally no distinction between the sacred and the secular except in the



Figure 8. Winged horse from Khirbat al-Mafjar

use to which works of art are put, and not in their forms; a house is built in a style in no way differing from a mosque. This worldly art of the Umayyads can be explained by the fact that Islamic art at this period was still in the process of formation, and by the sovereigns' need to surround themselves with a certain ostentatious display that would not fall behind that of their predecessors. But the works of art that adorn the hunting pavilions or the winter residences of the Umayyad princes are not only eclectic—paintings in the Hellenistic mode, Sasanid or Coptic sculpture, and Roman mosaics—but are examples of actual paganism, even without judging them according to the standards and example of the Prophet's Companions. The sight of these scenes of hunting and bathing, those naïvely opulent statues of dancing-girls and acrobats and effigies of triumphant sultans, would have filled someone like the Caliph ʿUmar with holy anger. In fact the phenomenon never ceases to astonish, if only because it was all so close to the beginnings of Islam and came about in the entourage of the very people who should have been Islam's protectors and guarantors. But the well-known worldliness of the Umayyad princes can be explained in part by the role which history assigned to them; they ruled under the sign of an irresistible secularization of the *ummah*, the Muslim community as a collective organism. The first four Caliphs of Islam, the "well guided" (*ar-rāshidūn*) had still been able to rule by their spiritual prestige and the support of the elite composed of the Prophet's former Companions and their immediate descendants; that is, there still existed a genuine Islamic aristocracy, influential enough to maintain order in the empire and inseparable from the power at the center. But matters became more complex when a large part of the conquered populations accepted Islam and thus acquired a certain autonomy, at the same time as the Bedouin tribes, made strong by the military services they had performed, acquired a gradual ascendancy over the old elite.

Islam's involvement in the social order, and the resultant weakening of the power of the Caliphate, were at the root of the tragic events which caused the deaths of the third and fourth Caliphs. ʿUthmān, the third Caliph, had started to reinforce the old Meccan aristocracy inspired by examples given by the Prophet himself;[6] ʿAlī, the fourth Caliph, was caught between this Meccan party, more Arab than Muslim, and an opposing movement with more or less Utopian aims, which was demanding the reinstitution of a purely spiritual hierarchy. Certain vacillations on the part of this Caliph, who was a great warrior and a great saint, can be explained only by this dilemma: whether to rule by means of tribal loyalties which Islam had superseded in the name of the unity of all believers, or to rule ineffectually. The Umayyads, for their part, carried on the policy of ʿUthmān, their kinsman, and pushed it even farther by opposing the ʿAlids, their rivals; that is, they relied openly on tribal bonds, and consequently cherished whatever linked them to their Arab forbears: poetry on Bedouin themes, horse-manship, and hunting. According to Muslim historians, who cannot on the whole forgive the Umayyads, except for certain very pious sover-eigns like ʿUmar II, these princes loved wine,

dancing, and music and cared nothing for the *Sunnah* of the Prophet.

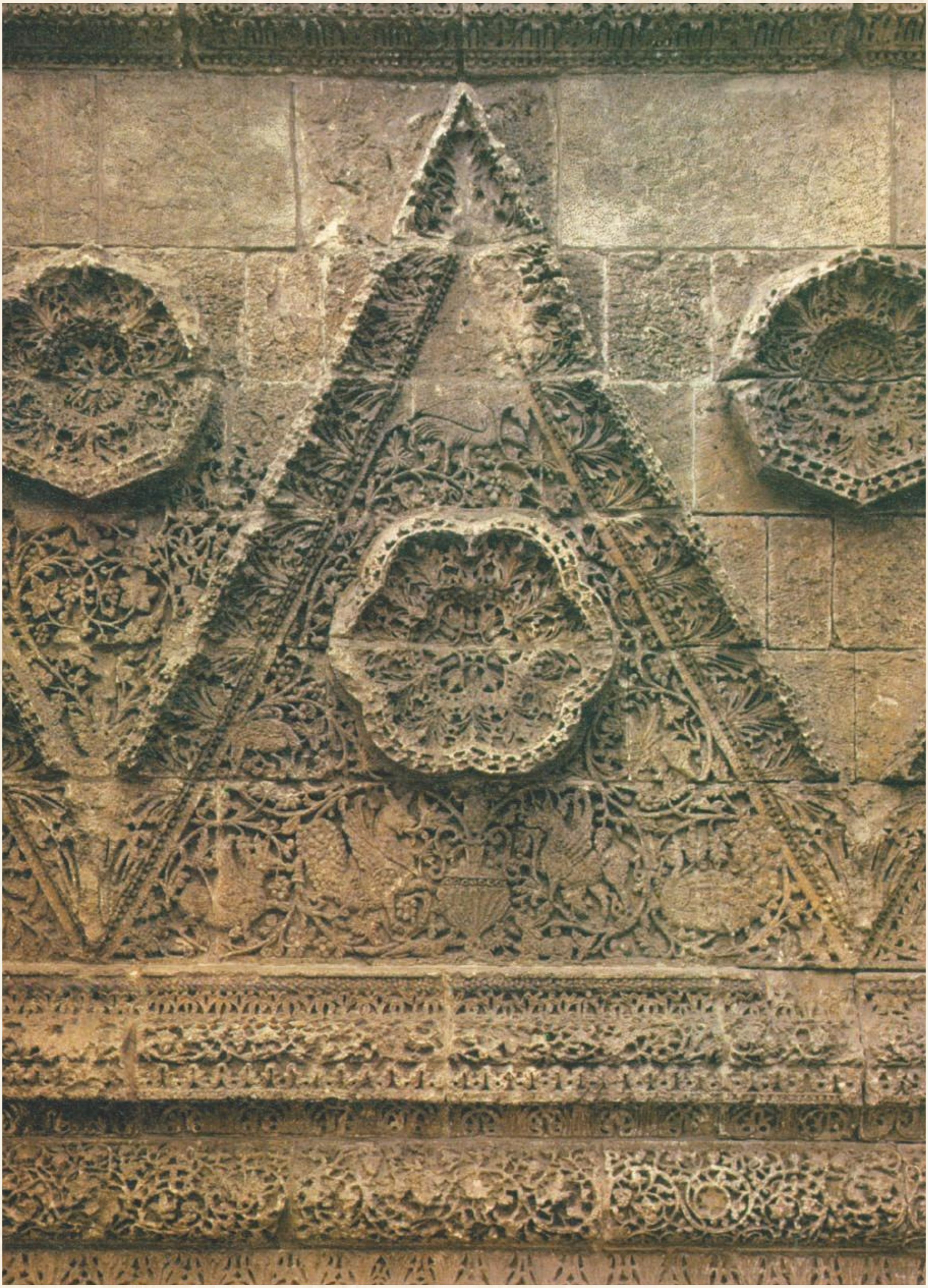
In any case, the following must be borne in mind. Once Islam had gone beyond its country of origin, it was propagated by means vastly different from those which characterized the early growth of Christianity. Christianity established itself in a world of social and political homogeneity, the Roman empire, by penetrating it gradually through hidden channels, as it were, until the moment when the Christian church under Constantine came to the surface of this world and took it over. Islam's advance, on the other hand, was led by its armies; it had to make sure of the frontiers of its empire before even assimilating the populations it had overrun, like an army that breasts the enemy's strong-points and then leaves them behind to be reduced at leisure. In fact, victorious Islam required no more of the vanquished peoples than recognition of its political supremacy; it wished above all to prevent them damaging its community, and trusted in the persuasive force of its message to convert them little by little. For this reason, there was inevitably a moment, during the first centuries of the Hegira, when the non-Muslim, or only superficially Islamicized elements stood out like vast islands in the interior of the Islamic world, and this accounts for such disconcerting phenomena as the Umayyad courts and certain Hellenistic attitudes of mind. According to every non-sacred logic, the spiritual unity of the world of Islam should have split apart, and yet it did not. But the secularization of politics drove the spiritual forces into anonymity; the last surviving Companions of the Prophet withdrew ever more from political life, together with their spiritual heirs. In compensation, their influence penetrated to popular levels, and it was as a result of this that the Islamicization of the world conquered by the Arabs was to be completed.

Something analogous came about in the domain of art; in the surroundings of princely palaces, it was craftsmanship in its most humble form that was the first to be Islamicized, and made Arab too, in a sense that remains to be defined.

4 Mshattā

Qaṣr al-Ḥayr, Quṣayr ʿAmra, Khirbat al-Mafjar, and Mshattā are among the names of country mansions built by the Umayyads on the edge of the desert as dwellings during the wet season, and archaeology has largely succeeded in restoring them. The architecture of these mansions recalls both Roman *castra* and Sasanid palaces. There is, nonetheless, a new element which already bespeaks Islamic art in the detail and particularly in the ornamentation, where geometrical and rhythmic motifs, like interlacement and meanders in swastikas, emerge gradually from conventionally classical compositions; instead of continuing to be simple borders, they become the main theme.

The most notable work of profane Umayyad art is indisputably the sculptured façade of the mansion of Mshattā,[7] a winter residence which, according to every indication, was abandoned before being finished; this allows us to date it towards the end of Umayyad rule (750). If architecture like the Dome of the Rock presupposes an entire urban culture, the décor of Mshattā seems to express the taste of an Arab prince of Bedouin origins, despite all the details of Greco-Roman derivation. It is as if the Arab lord who ordered this work had shown the chief artist some rich brocade or Sasanid carpet with symmetrically repeated motifs and asked him to reproduce it in stone five meters high and forty-three meters broad. But that is to speak in euphemisms; what we mean is simply this: the overall composition of this sculpted décor, with its great zigzag molding and its intercalated rosettes, some round and some octagonal, is at the furthest possible remove from the architectural *ratio* of classic Greek or Latin art; it is "barbaric", and all the more strikingly so because the classical elements it employs are used contrary to their original role. Thus, for example, the great



7. Section from the façade of the castle of Mshattā, in the Staatliche Museen, Berlin



8. Triangular ornament from Tuareg leatherwork

zigzag molding with its acanthus motif affects the form of a classical cornice, an essentially static element intended to support a roof; in the Mshattā context, it takes on a dynamic or rhythmic role; as a decorative element, it is no different from a stitched leather thong on a Bedouin saddle-cover, in the same way that the rosettes which go with it, and which are no doubt derived from the rosettes adorning ceiling-panels, perhaps stand for the little ornamental bells. All this sculpted carpetry has more to do with the culture of the tent than with architecture proper. Besides, the Arabs, like all nomads, had little feeling for the conventions of architecture; on the contrary, they valued the minor arts, trinkets, expensively decorated weapons and, above all, rich textiles which could be carried on their travels and hung on the walls of their tents. Seen from afar, the façade of Mshattā looks like one of those enclosures, made by hanging carpets, which surrounded the group of royal tents in a military camp.

The details of ornamentation can, as we said, be linked more or less directly to the Hellenic heritage; in fact, one finds the vine and acanthus motifs, as well as all the fantastic animals of antiquity, such as the gryphon and the winged horse.[8] But a view of the whole immediately effaces the Hellenic reminiscences, and what stands out is a rhythmic and luxuriant outspreading of forms, which brings us closer to India than Greece. It is Asia too, and not Europe, that is recalled by these pairs of facing beasts drinking from vases, out of which rise climbing vine-branches; there is nothing in the Byzantine art of the period that is directly comparable. Certain ornamental motifs appear to point to Coptic art and others to the eastern confines of Iran, where Hellenic influence combined with an Asiatic legacy. It is even harder to decide what this fantastic flora and fauna meant to the artists and their patrons, for ornamental art is a kind of threshold between what is conscious and what is unconscious, where ancient symbols fall into a latent state from which they awake only later when some new spiritual doctrine coincides with their meaning. In all this tissue of vines peopled with beasts, mythical and real, there is a kind of Dionysiac reminiscence, in the broad sense of the word, and there is nothing paradoxical in this, for Bacchic poetry was also perpetuated in the world of Islam, and often took on a spiritual significance. Moreover, in Christian art, the vine peopled with all sorts of animate creatures was identified with Christ.

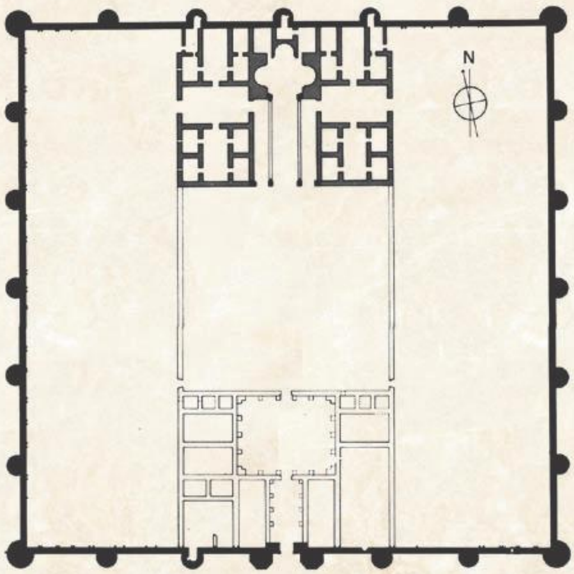


Figure 9. Plan of Mshattā

The art of Mshattā is not yet Islamic art. It is like a prolongation, into the world of Islam and in a form already Arabicized, of the Alexandrian legacy; and the Umayyad empire did indeed almost coincide with the Greco-Iranian empire founded a thousand years earlier by Alexander the Great, "the two-horned" (*dhuʾl-qarnayn*).[9]

However, the art of Mshattā does, in a way, anticipate monumental Islamic art, particularly in combining different planes, or degrees, of décor; the big relief of zigzag moldings and rosettes is made to be seen from a distance, whereas the sculptures in vegetal and zoomorphic forms are then no more than an iridescent tissue of light and shadows; it is on approaching them that they become transformed into living shapes. The manner in which the decorative triangles and geometrical rosettes are superimposed on the facets of the bastion towers again foreshadows the Islamic art of the succeeding centuries and, in particular, Seljuk art.

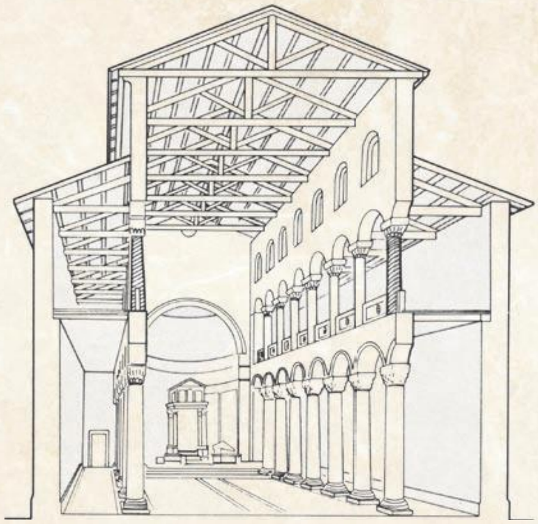


Figure 10. Scheme of a Christian basilica seen from inside

5 The Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus

Art never creates *ex nihilo*. Its originality lies in the synthesis of pre-existing elements. Thus, the sacred architecture of Islam was born on the day when success was achieved in creating, not new forms of pillars and arches, but a new kind of space conformable to Islamic worship.

Let us compare the liturgical plan of a church with that of a mosque. A church has a sacramental mid-point, the altar, towards which everything converges; the choir is the sanctuary sheltering the altar, and the nave is like a path leading from the outer world towards this sanctuary; when the church is divided into narthex, nave, and choir, it bespeaks a hierarchy of approach to the sacred, and the light which falls, in a basilica-style church, from the windows of the choir and the sky-lights of the middle nave, accentuates this movement and hierarchy. But the mosque has no sacred center within its walls; the prayer-niche (*miḥrāb*) is there simply to indicate the direction (*qiblah*) of Mecca, and to shelter the *imām* who leads the communal prayers standing in front of the faithful, whose ranks are spread out in breadth rather than being ranged in depth; the space within a mosque is like a segment of one of the innumerable concentric circles surrounding the sanctuary at Mecca.

When Muslims took over some Christian basilica, as happened occasionally in Syria,[10] they transformed its lengthwise axis into a transverse one, and this change was enforced in any case by its reorientation. Christian churches were orientated on the east, whereas Mecca lay to the south from Syria. One result of this change of direction was to give the arcades separating the various naves an entirely new feeling; instead of "leading the eye" into the deep interior in the direction of the choir, they cross the oratory frontally and "bring the eye to rest", in accordance with the essentially static and non-dynamic conception of space, in the state of equilibrium and repose that Islamic architecture expresses in all its forms.

In a certain sense, the sacred architecture of Christianity reflects time in the form of space, as we have already pointed out in speaking of orientation. The liturgical axis of a church is

Opposite: **9**. Eastern part of the prayer hall of the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus; the shrine on the left side of the picture contains St. John the Baptist's head. The upper arcades have been reconstructed after a fire



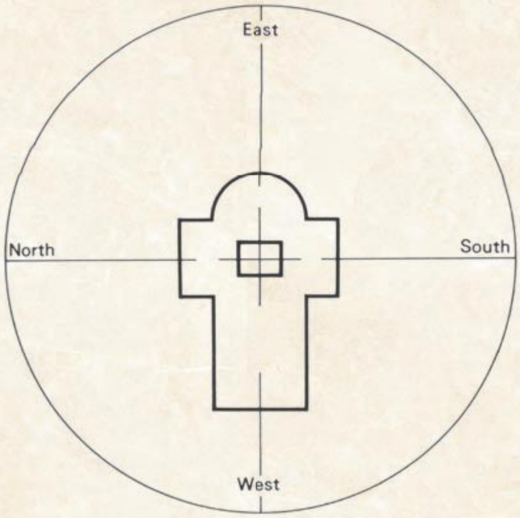
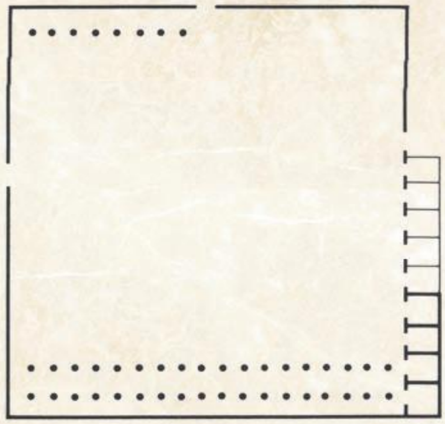


Figure 11. Scheme of the orientation of a church


Figure 12. Plan of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina

normally fixed on the spring equinox; that is, the officiating priest and the congregation face that point on the horizon where the sun, symbol of the risen Christ, ascends at Easter. This point is therefore in reality a cyclic moment, a moment which somehow touches on eternity, and the entire liturgical arrangement of the church, with its division into "east", "west", "midday" and "midnight", accordingly reflects cyclic or temporal measurements.[11] For the Latin Church of our own day to have been able to forget this symbolism, which is of the most evident kind, it must have artificially dissociated the fundamental data of space from those of time; the ordinary run of men were formerly well aware that time is measured by the motions of heaven.

The sacred architecture of Islam does not reflect the measurement of time, orientated as it is on a terrestrial center. The space, of which it communicates the experience, is as if reabsorbed into the ubiquity of the present moment; it does not beckon the eye in a specific direction; it suggests no tension or antinomy as between the here-below and the beyond, or between earth and heaven; it possesses all its fullness in every place. This is particularly evident in the so-called "peristyle" mosques, which are built on the model of the first mosque at Medina.

This really consisted of nothing more than the domestic courtyard onto which opened out the very simple dwellings of the Prophet and his family. Against the wall which bounded this courtyard about 100 cubits square, on the side facing Mecca, a shelter had been built with a roof of branches and beaten earth held up by palm-trunks like pillars. At the time of communal prayers, believers who could find no place under this roof prayed in the courtyard. A kind of gallery, the *ṣuffah*, was built against the opposite wall; it served as a shelter for the poorer Companions of the Prophet, and one can see in it the origin of the galleries or porticos that surround the courtyards of mosques. According to this model, mosques with a horizontal roof generally open onto a courtyard which is part of the liturgical area, and which nearly always has a fountain where the faithful can make their ablutions before performing the prescribed prayers. The roofed oratory can be more or less extended; it can contain a varying rank of pillars without changing its quality. The consecrated element, if one may so describe it, is the ground itself, the entire ground-space of the mosque; it is usually covered with matting or carpets, and the believer takes off his shoes before stepping onto it. The ritual prayer involves prostrations, in which the forehead touches the ground, and a sitting position on the ground itself, which is the normal position of rest and contemplation.

The interior of a mosque is made to be seen from this position, which amounts to saying that it relates to the earth and that its various components—pillars, columns, and arcades—are distributed in such a way as to make each spot a center sufficient to itself.

The Great Mosque of Damascus built between 706 and 715 A.D. by the Umayyad Caliph al-Walīd, is the first to transpose the model of the old Medina mosque into monumental forms. This Caliph also rebuilt the mosque of the Prophet at Medina, and when he had the modest huts of raw brick, where the Prophet and his wives had lived, torn down in order to include their sites in the new edifice, the people of Medina wept bitter tears. Certain of them accused the Caliph of building "not in the style of mosques, but of churches". The triumphal Umayyad style did in fact contrast with the simplicity and sobriety of primitive Islam; however, from the political point of view, al-Walīd was right to put all the artistic and technical skill of his age at the service of Islam. History has not proved him wrong, for Umayyad ostentation was unable to suffocate the spirit of poverty inherent in Islam; in what followed, Islam was able to achieve a perfect balance between beauty—which is itself richness—and simplicity.

The Great Mosque of Damascus covers a rectangle 160 by 100 meters formed by the precinct walls of an ancient Hellenic temple. The fact that it replaced a church of St. John the Baptist—its famous relic, the Baptist's head, is kept in the mosque—has given rise to a theory that the mosque was no more than a transformation of this church; but there is nothing to this, for there was never a church at Damascus of such vast dimensions; besides, all the component elements of the mosque are obviously in proportion.

Three lines of arcades are set parallel to the rear wall, on two levels, with large lower bays and smaller paired bays above. These arcades form, as it were, three naves covered by long roofs with double slopes. This set of three naves is reminiscent of a basilica but, unlike a basilical schema, the middle nave is not elevated above

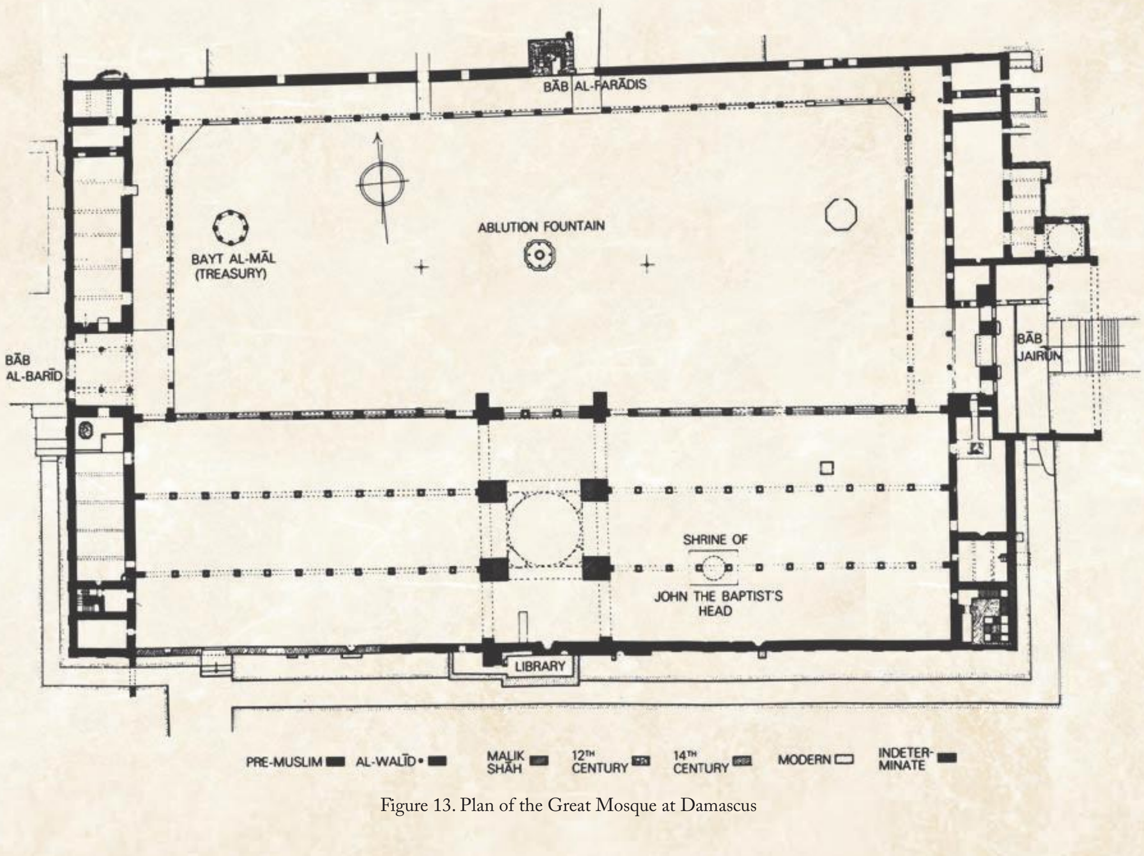
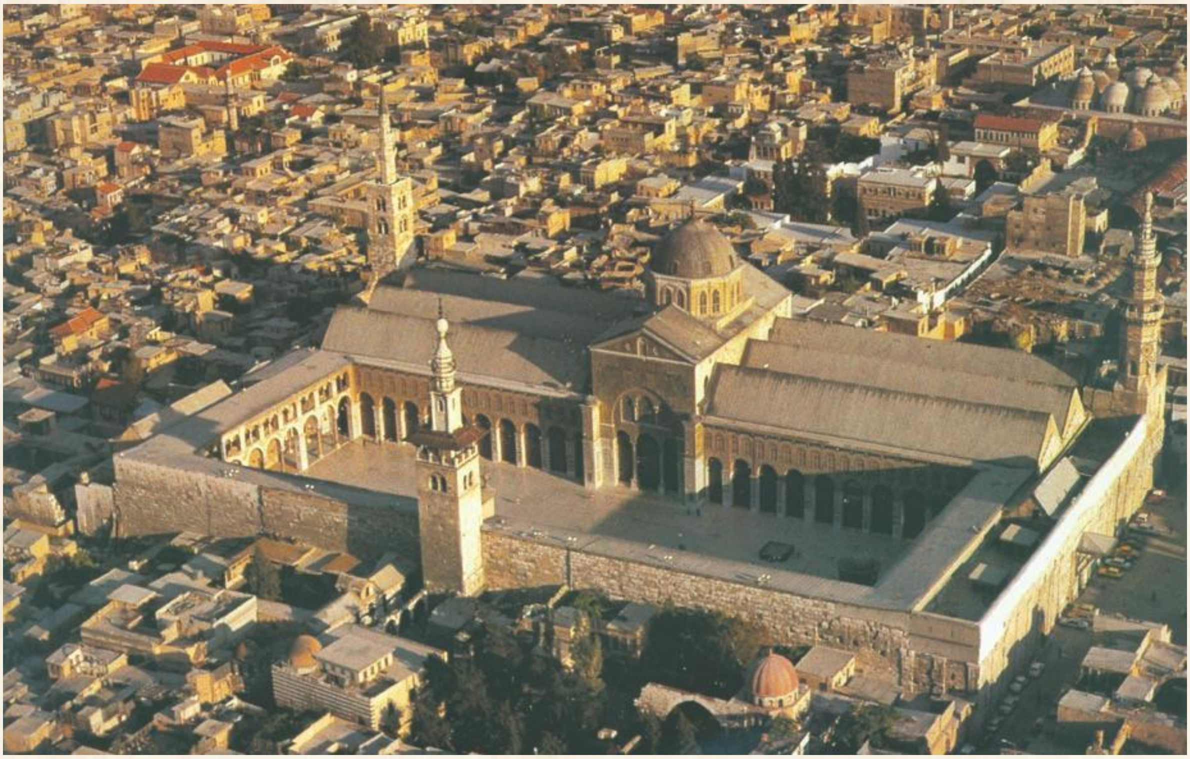


Figure 13. Plan of the Great Mosque at Damascus



10. General view of the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus



11. Courtyard and porticos of the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus, taken from the south-west corner



Figure 14. Section of the Great Mosque at Damascus

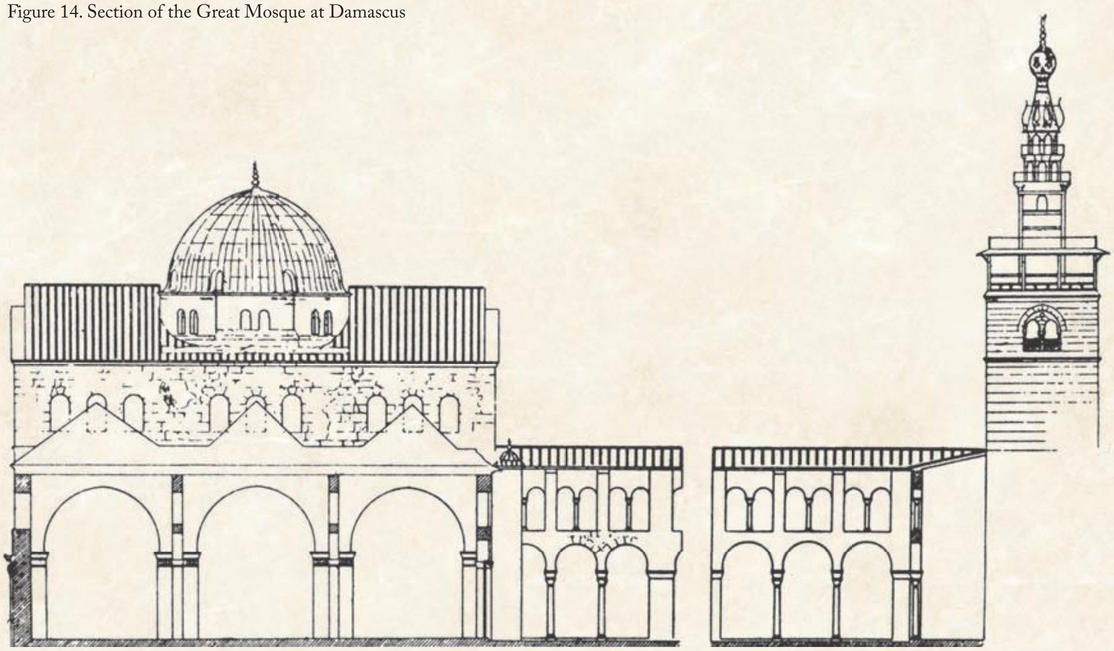


Figure 15. Section of the Great Mosque at Damascus

the level of the two others and has no sky-lights which in a basilica would pour light into the interior; the light enters laterally through the arcades opening onto the courtyard.

The courtyard is surrounded by porticos, the arcades of which are also on two levels and have the same form as those supporting the roof of the oratory. This repetition of one and the same architectural device is transformed into rhythm by the one-in-three alternation of pillars and columns.

The most "Byzantine", and even "Roman", part of the building consists of a sort of transept, which cuts across the oratory's naves and accentuates the axis of the *miḥrāb* by linking it back to the courtyard. A tall cupola on an octagonal drum, the "Dome of the Eagle", surmounts this transept at its mid-point. There have been attempts to explain the frankly basilical aspect of this section of the building as a transference of Imperial Roman symbolism to the caliphate of the Umayyads. It is possible, in fact, that the





13. The "Dome of the Eagle" above the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus

cupola marks the spot where the Caliph stood for Friday prayers or at the great festivals. But the architectural emphasis here can, in any case, be explained by the need to indicate the *qiblah* and to echo the *miḥrāb* on the inner "façade" of the mosque which overlooks the courtyard.

As for the form of the *miḥrāb* itself, which is thought to have been introduced into mosque architecture at the time of al-Walīd, it is definitely not the equivalent of the imperial exedra. It is better to compare it to the apse of Christian churches, without necessarily thinking of it as a borrowing, for the sacred niche has a more general and ancient origin, which we shall discuss later (see Chapter V, 2).

There are other liturgical elements which first appear during this period: the pulpit (*minbar*) in the form of a stepped throne, the prototype of which was a sort of stool used by the Prophet to preach to the faithful gathered together in the Medina mosque, and the minaret which is used for the call to prayer; at the beginning of Islam, the muezzin called from a roof or rock. The Great Mosque of Damascus had three minarets; two were simply the corner towers of the ancient Greco-Roman *temenos*; the third, erected by al-Walīd, rises to the north side of the courtyard, along the axis of the *miḥrāb*.

The walls of the mosque were adorned with mosaics, of which only fragments survive; they represent fantastic towns and palaces, surrounded by flowers and bordered by rivers, all composed with great mastery of design and color, which bears witness to the survival of a school of Byzantine art in the Syria of the Umayyads. This was to enjoy no direct continuity in the world of Islam, where mosaics would soon be replaced by other techniques more suitable to the geometric style of décor; mosaics with their fragmented iridescent surfaces, which are partly transparent, bestow something incorporeal and uncertain on the walls they cover; ceramic tiles on the other hand, so typical of Islamic art during the following centuries, define the surfaces at the same time as making them luminous. The significance of the mosaics of Damascus is unknown; they have been interpreted by some per-

Opposite: **12.** View of the Bride (*al-ʿArous*) minaret from the courtyard of the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus



14. Mosaic on the walls of the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus

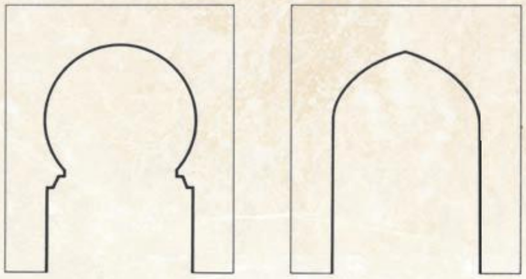


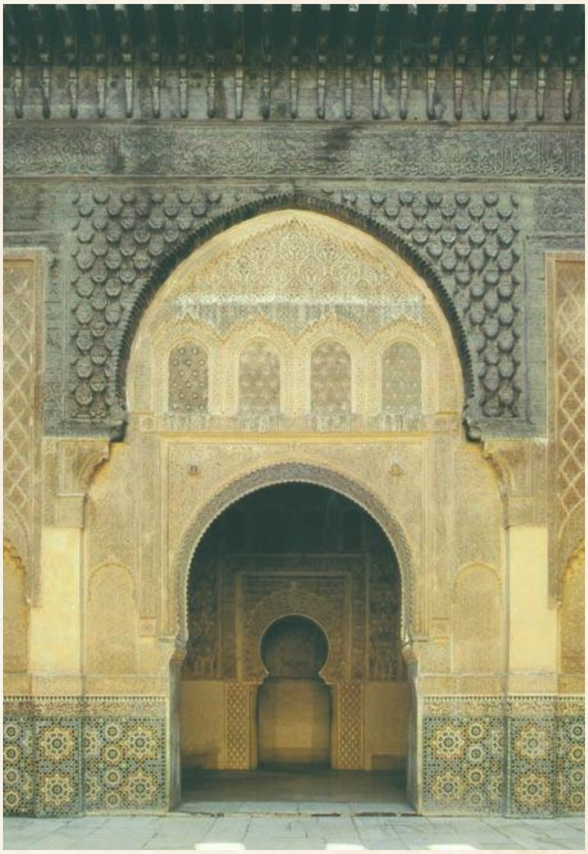
Figure 16. Horseshoe arch and keel arch

sons as representing the Koranic Paradise, and by others as alluding to the towns conquered by Islam; but one thing is certain: nowhere in these stylized landscapes is there a human or animal figure, which is an indirect proof of the traditional origin of aniconism in Islam.

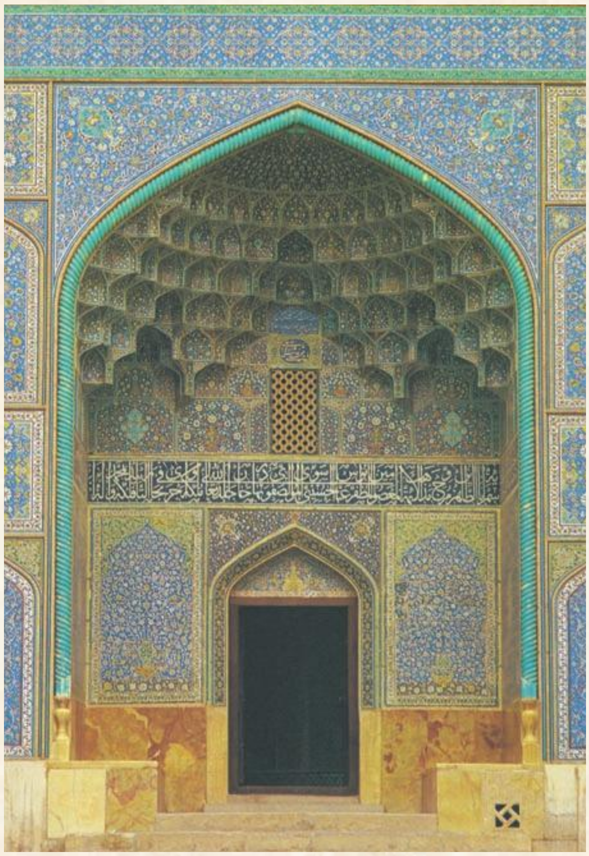
But what is of more particular interest here is the architectural space, in the way that it stands from the largely intact structure of the building. This is not space folded back on itself, as in a Roman or Byzantine church; the vast oratory opens onto the courtyard, and the daylight floods in from the front, hardly impeded by the screen of arcades; this space has nothing in common with a Greco-Roman peristyle architecture, whose entire reality is that of the walls, columns, and architraves. The true aim of Islamic architecture is space as such, in its undifferentiated plenitude. The majestic sweep of the arcades—which are not simple half-circles but swell gently into horseshoe form—is enough to make this quality manifest. It is not for nothing that the Arabic name for the arcade, *rawq* (*riwāq* in the plural), has become synonymous with the beautiful, graceful, and pure; a simple arcade built in harmonious proportions has the virtue of transforming space from a purely quantitative reality into a qualitative one. And it is well known that Islamic architecture developed a great variety of forms of arch, which were already apparent in Umayyad architecture and two of which are the most typical: the horseshoe arch, the most perfect expression of which is in Maghribī art, and the "keel" arch which typifies Persian art. Both these combine the two qualities of static repose and ascending lightness. The Persian arch is both generous and graceful; it rises quite effortlessly, like the still flame of an oil-lamp sheltered from the wind; the Maghribī arch, on the other hand, is characterized by the breadth of its expanse, which is frequently enclosed in a rectangular framework, to produce a synthesis of stability and abundance.



15. Arches on the northern side of the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus



16. Example of a horseshoe arch: courtyard of the Ben Yūsuf Madrasah, Marrakesh, Morocco



17. Example of a keel arch: entrance to the Shaykh Luṭf-Allāh Mosque, Iṣfahān, Persia

Notes to Chapter II

1. Apparently Christians considered the site of the destroyed temple accursed.

2. According to the Byzantine historian Eutychius, ʿUmar was visiting the atrium of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in the company of the patriarch Sophronius, when the time for prayer came. He told the patriarch, "I wish to pray", and was told, "Pray here". But ʿUmar refused, and was led to the adjacent basilica, to pray there. Again he declined, and went out from the basilica towards the East, and prayed alone. He then explained that he had wished to forestall the Muslims confiscating the church, on the pretext that ʿUmar had prayed there, and turning it into a mosque.

3. Certain archaeologists maintain that it was not the Holy of Holies but the altar for burnt offerings that occupied this site; but the boundary of the plateau, where the Dome of the Rock stands today, argues against a site of the temple west of this point.

4. Notably the Byzantine Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at Jerusalem.

5. In the majority of domed Muslim buildings, the octagon is placed as an intermediary between the cupola and the cubic base, which confers on it another spiritual significance. It then corresponds to the eight Angels bearing the divine throne.

6. The Prophet did not fail to appreciate the political talents of his opponents among the Quraysh, such as those of Abū Sufyān; when they were utterly vanquished, he did not hesitate to entrust leading roles to them.

7. This façade has been removed in its entirety to the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin.

8. An episode from the life of the Prophet proves that these fantastic or mythological animals played a certain role in the imagination of the Arabs: when ʿĀʾishah, the daughter of Abū Bakr, was promised in marriage to the Prophet, she was still very young and had toys, including some winged horses made of leather. "Do horses have wings?" asked the Prophet, smiling; "Why!" she replied, "You a prophet, and you don't know that Solomon's horses could fly!"

9. Or: "of two ages", with the horn symbolizing a cycle or century.

10. They were often content with one part of the church.

11. The exceptions to this norm, in traditional architecture, are explicable in terms of the terrain. Thus, the basilica of St. Peter's at Rome has a choir facing the west, because of the position of the apostle's tomb and the uneven nature of the ground. If the priest stood behind the altar during the Mass and faced the congregation, this was not at all in order to "come together" with them, but in order to "orientate" himself.

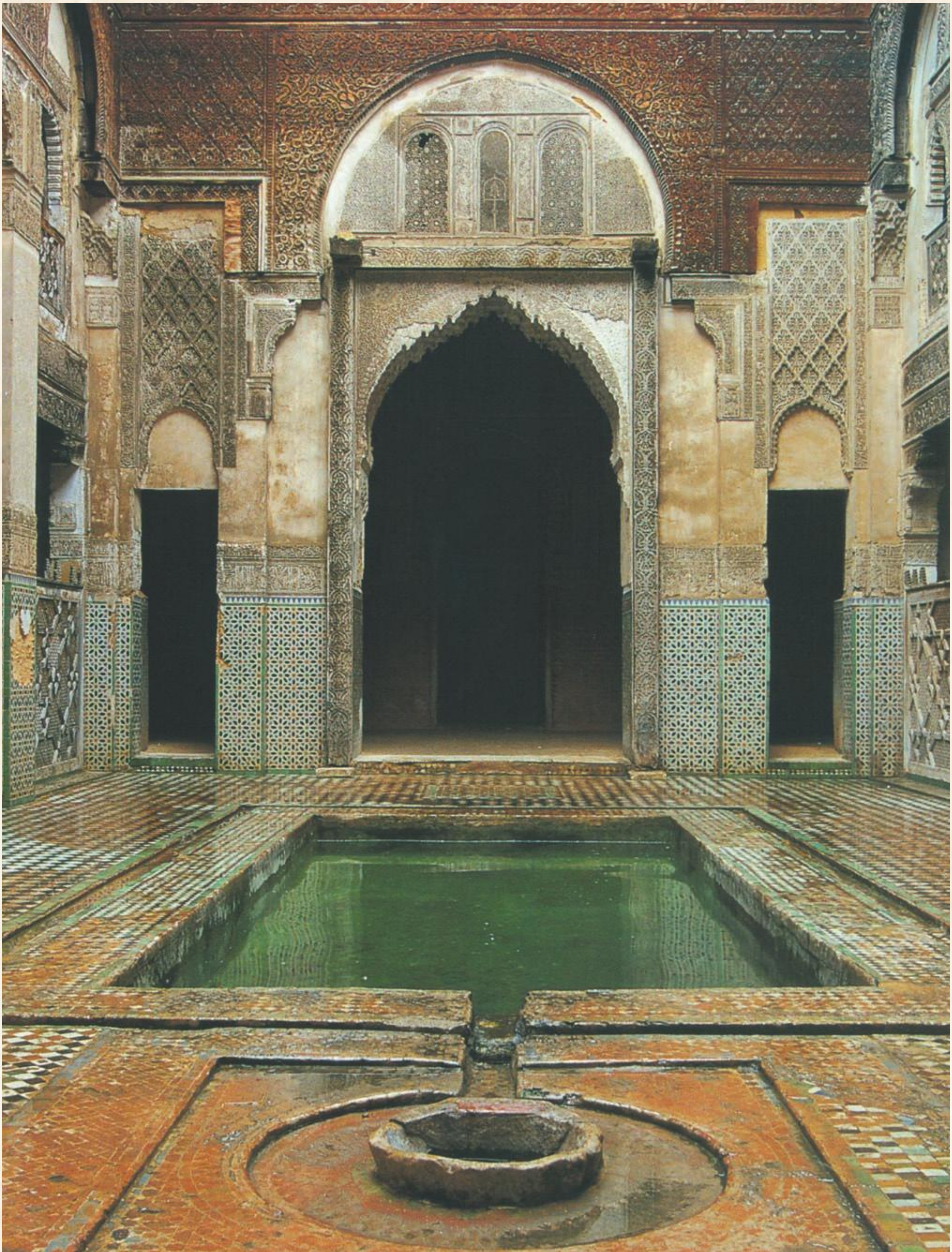
Chapter III
The Question of Images

1 *Aniconism*

The prohibition of images in Islam applies, strictly speaking, only to the image of the Divinity; it stands, therefore, in the perspective of the decalogue, or more exactly of Abrahamic monotheism, which Islam sees itself as renewing. In its last manifestation as in its first—in the time of Muḥammad as in the age of Abraham—monotheism directly opposes idolatrous polytheism,[1] so that any plastic representation of the divinity is for Islam, according to a "dialectic" that is both historical and divine, the distinctive mark of the error which "associates" the relative with the Absolute, or the created with the Uncreated, by reducing the one to the level of the other. To deny idols, or still better to destroy them, is like translating into concrete terms the fundamental testimony of Islam, the formula *lā ilāha illa ʾLlāh* ("there is no divinity save God"), and just as this testimony in Islam dominates everything or consumes everything in the manner of a purifying fire, so also does the denial of idols, whether actual or virtual, tend to become generalized. Thus it is that portraiture of the divine messengers (*rusul*), prophets (*anbiyāʾ*), and saints (*awliyāʾ*) is avoided, not only because their images could become the object of idolatrous worship, but also because of the respect inspired by their inimitability; they are the vice-regents of God on earth; "God created Adam in His form" (a saying of the Prophet), and this resemblance of man to God becomes somehow manifest in prophets and saints, without it being possible, even so, to grasp this on the purely corporeal level; the stiff, inanimate image of a divine man could not be other than an empty shell, an imposture, an idol.

In Sunnī Arab circles, the representation of any living being is frowned upon, because of respect for the divine secret contained within every creature,[2] and if the prohibition of images is not observed with equal rigor in all ethnic groups, it is none the less strict for everything that falls within the liturgical framework of Islam. Aniconism—which is the appropriate term here, and not iconoclasm[3]—became somehow an inseparable concomitant of the sacred; it is even one of the foundations, if not the main foundation, of the sacred art of Islam.

This may appear paradoxical, for the normal foundation of a sacred art is symbolism, and in a religion expressing itself in anthropomorphic symbols—the Koran speaks of God's "face", His "hands", and the throne He sits upon—the rejection of images seems to strike at the very roots of a visual art dealing with things divine. But there is a whole array of subtle compensations which need to be borne in mind, and in particular the following: a sacred art is not necessarily made of images, even in the broadest sense of the term; it may be no more than the quite silent exteriorization, as it were, of a contemplative state, and in this case—or in this respect—it reflects no ideas, but transforms the surroundings qualitatively, by having them share in an equilibrium whose center of gravity is the unseen. That such is the nature of Islamic art is easily verified. Its object is, above all, man's environment—hence the dominant role of architecture—and its quality is essentially contemplative. Aniconism does not detract from this quality; very much to the contrary, for, by precluding every image inviting man to fix his mind on something outside himself and to project his soul onto an "individualizing" form,



18. Courtyard of the Sahrīj Madrasah near al-Andalūs Mosque in Fez, Morocco, 1322. View from the courtyard into the prayer hall

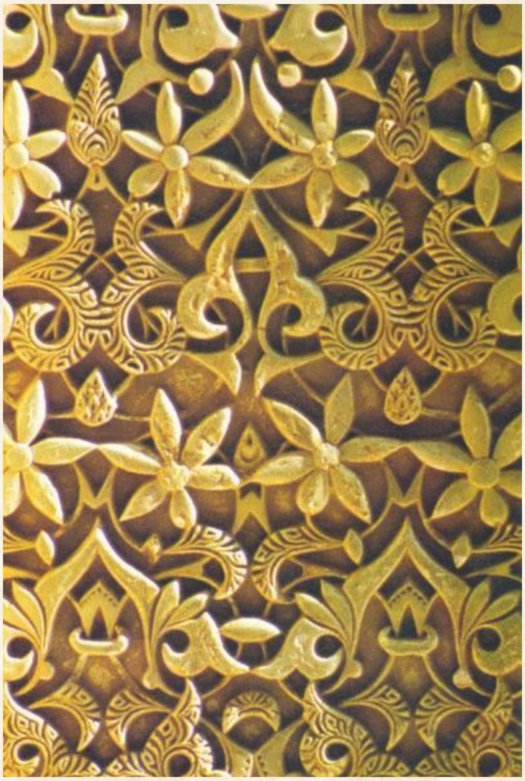
it creates a void. In this respect, the function of Islamic art is analogous to that of virgin nature, especially the desert, which is likewise favorable to contemplation, although in another respect the order created by art opposes the chaos of desert landscape.

The proliferation of decoration in Muslim art does not contradict this quality of contemplative emptiness; on the contrary, ornamentation with abstract forms enhances it through its unbroken rhythm and its endless interweaving. Instead of ensnaring the mind and leading it into some imaginary world, it dissolves mental "fixations", just as contemplation of a running stream, a flame, or leaves quivering in the wind, can detach consciousness from its inward "idols".

It is instructive to compare Islam's attitude to images with that of the Greek Orthodox Church. The Byzantine Church is known to have gone through an iconoclast crisis, perhaps not uninfluenced by the example of Islam. Certainly, the Church was moved to reconsider defining the role of the sacred image, the icon; and the Seventh Ecumenical Council, in confirming the victory of the adorers of images, justified its decision in the following words: "God Himself is beyond all possible description or representation, but since the Divine Word took human nature upon itself, which it 'reintegrated into its original form by infusing it with divine beauty', God can and must be adored through the human image of Christ." This is no more than an application of the dogma of divine incarnation, and it shows how far this way of seeing things is from the viewpoint of Islam. Nevertheless, the two perspectives have a common basis in the notion of man's theomorphic nature.

The declaration of the Seventh Ecumenical Council took the form of a prayer addressed to the Holy Virgin, for it is the Virgin who lent the Divine Child her human substance, thus making Him accessible to the senses. This act of veneration recalls incidentally the gesture of the Prophet in placing both hands in protection on the icon of the Virgin and Child painted on the inner wall of the Kaʿba.

It might well be thought that this gesture ought to have led to a concession in Islamic law permitting representation of the Holy Virgin. But this would be to misconstrue the spiritual economy of Islam, which puts aside every superfluous or equivocal element, although this does not prevent Muslim masters of the "inward science" (*al-ʿilm al-bāṭin*) from acknowledging the meaning and legitimacy of icons in their proper context. We actually have a particularly profound vindication of the Christian veneration of icons in the words of one of the greatest masters of Muslim esoterism, the Sufi Muḥyī-ʾd-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, who wrote in his *Meccan Revelations* (*al-futūḥāt al-makkiyyah*): "the Byzantines developed the art of painting to perfection because, for them, the singular nature (*al-fardaniyyah*) of our Lord Jesus, is the supreme support of concentration upon Divine



19. Stucco decoration from the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain. Arabesque with stylized jasmine flowers

Unity". It will be seen that this interpretation of the icon, although it is far removed from Muslim theology as generally accepted, is nevertheless at home in the perspective of *tawḥīd*, the doctrine of Divine Unity.

Apart from this, the words of the Prophet condemning those who aspire to imitate the work of the Creator have not always been interpreted as a rejection pure and simple of all figurative art; many have taken them only as condemning Promethean or idolatrous intent.

For Aryan peoples like the Persians, as well as for the Mongols, the representational image is far too natural a mode of expression for them to be able to pass it over. But the anathema against artists seeking to imitate the work of the Creator remains none the less effective, for figurative Muslim art has always avoided naturalism; it is not simply ingenuousness or ignorance of visual means that causes Persian miniatures not to use perspective giving the illusion of three-dimensional space or not to model the human body in light and shade. In the same way, the zoomorphic sculpture occasionally met with in the world of Islam never exceeds the bounds of a kind of heraldic stylization; its products could not possibly be mistaken for living and breathing creatures.

To recapitulate the question whether figurative art is prohibited or tolerated in Islam, we conclude that figurative art can perfectly well be integrated into the universe of Islam provided it does not forget its proper limits, but it will still play only a peripheral role; it will not participate directly in the spiritual economy of Islam.

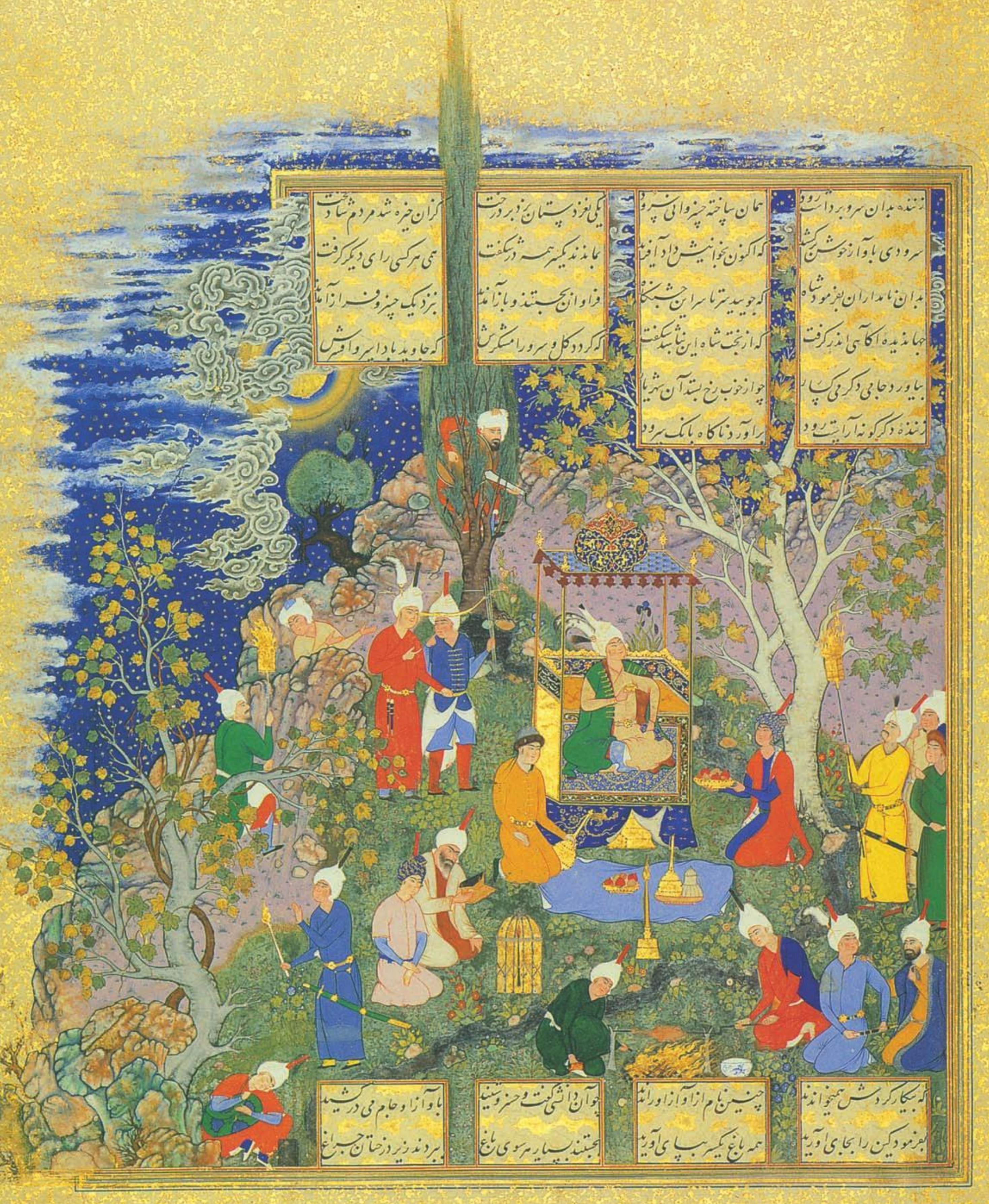
As for Islamic aniconism, two aspects in all are involved. On the one hand, it safeguards the primordial dignity of man, whose form, made "in the image of God",[4] shall be neither imitated nor usurped by a work of art that is necessarily limited and one-sided; on the other hand, nothing capable of becoming an "idol", if only in a relative and quite provisional manner, must interpose between man and the invisible presence of God. What utterly outweighs everything else is the testimony that there is "no divinity save God"; this melts away every objectivization of the Divine before it is even able to come forth.

2 The Persian Miniature

For the reasons we have just explained, the art of the miniature cannot be sacred art. To the extent, however, that it is spontaneously integrated into what may be called the Islamic concept of life and the world, it shares more or less in a certain spiritual atmosphere, either as manifesting virtues or, again, as incidentally reflecting a contemplative vision.

What we have in mind in the first instance is the Persian miniature, and not the Mesopotamian miniatures generally grouped under the title of the "Baghdad School", which have sometimes been seen as "Arab painting" *par excellence*. These are far from having the quality of the Persian miniatures, and they are not Arab, in any case, except to the extent that the Arab racial element was one of the constituents in the vast cosmopolitan city that was Baghdad until the Mongol invasion of the mid-thirteenth century A.D. A certain grandiloquence of gesture, a love of linear arabesque, and a caustic wit that falls occasionally into triviality—these are perhaps Arab characteristics, especially since the human types portrayed are frankly Semitic; but these are Arab characteristics of a lower order, developed in an excessively urban environment. The origin of this school was, in brief, the translation into Arabic of illustrated scientific books—about medicine, botany, or zoology—as they existed among Hellenizing peoples; the illustrations were adopted with the texts. The first copyists must have been Christians or Sabaeans. Later, Arab or Persian Muslims took over and gradually came to apply their new art to illustrating popular tales, like Ḥarīrī's *Sessions*, which perpetuated the art of the popular storyteller.

Opposite: 20. *Bārbad, the Concealed Musician*, from Shāh Ṭahmāsp's *Shāhnāmeh*, fol. 731a, attributed to Mīrzā ʿAlī, c. 1535





21. *Sleeping Rustam*, from a *Shāhnāmeh* of Firdawsi, attributable to Sultan Muḥammad, c. 1512-1522



22. *Yūsuf Gives a Royal Banquet in Honor of his Marriage*, from Sultan Ibrāhīm Mīrzā's *Haft Awrang*, fol. 123a, 16th century



23. *Khusraw sees Shīrīn Bathing in a Spring*, from Niẓāmī's *Khamsah*, composed for Shāh Ṭahmāsp, Tabrīz, c. 1535

During the empire of the Seljuks, who first occupied Baghdad in 1055 A.D., influences from Central and Eastern Asia reached the metropolis, and this explains the style of a manuscript such as the *Book of Teryak* of 1199 A.D., which is kept in the Paris *Bibliothèque Nationale*. Some of these miniatures, with a certain elegance of line, have an astrological symbolism, which is also found in the metalwork of the period and implicitly proves the existence of traditions of non-Islamic origin.

In the Seljuk period, figurative themes of a Turco-Mongol character are somewhat apparent in all the minor arts, in both Iran and Iraq. The true Persian miniature, however, which is indisputably the most perfect figurative art on the soil of Islam, did not come into the world until after the conquest of Iran by the Mongols, and more precisely under the rule of the Īl-Khāns (1256). It is modeled upon Chinese painting with its perfect blend of calligraphy and illustration. Following this model, the reduction of space to a plane surface and the co-ordination of human figures and landscape were all retained in the Persian miniature; but the bold and delicate strokes of the Chinese brush gave way to the precise and continuous line drawn by the calamus in the true manner of Arabic calligraphy, and the contoured surfaces were filled with unbroken colors. The link between writing and image remains fundamental to the Persian miniature, which belongs, as a whole, to the art of books; all the famous miniaturists were calligraphers before becoming painters. We said earlier that the art of writing somehow takes the place of the art of icons in Islam; it was by way of the art of books that drawing finally came together with writing.

What gives the miniature its almost unique kind of beauty is not so much the scenes it portrays as the nobility and simplicity of the poetical atmosphere that pervades them.

This atmosphere, or this mode—to use a term that carries a precise meaning in traditional music—occasionally confers upon the Persian miniature a kind of Edenic reverberation, and this is profoundly significant, for one of its basic themes, with distant Iranian roots, is that of the transfigured landscape, symbolizing both the earthly paradise and the "heavenly land", which, while being hidden from the eyes of fallen humanity, remains existent in the world of spiritual light that is manifest to God's saints. It is an unshadowed landscape, in which each object is made of exceedingly precious substance and where every tree and flower is unique of its kind, like the plants which Dante situates in the earthly Paradise, on the mountain of Purgatory, and whose seeds are borne by the perpetual wind that plays upon the mountaintop to produce all the vegetation upon earth.

This symbolic landscape is essentially distinct from that suggested by Chinese painting. Unlike the latter, it is not undefined; it does not appear to be emerging from the void, the undifferentiated origin of all things; it is like a well-ordered cosmos, occasionally encased in a crystalline architecture that encloses it like a magic casing and sets the scenes without making them too material.

In general terms, the Persian miniature—and we are here considering it in its best phases—does not seek to portray the outward world as it commonly presents itself to the senses, with all its disharmonies and accidentalities; what it is indirectly describing is the "immutable essences" (*al-aʿyān ath-thābitah*) of things, by which a horse is not simply a particular member of its species but the horse *par excellence*; it is this generic quality that the art of the miniature seeks to grasp. If the "immutable essences" of things, their archetypes, cannot be apprehended because they are beyond form, they are none the less reflected in the contemplative imagination; hence the dream quality—not one of idle reverie—that pertains to the most beautiful miniatures; it is a clear and translucent dream as if illumined from within.

All normal painting is, moreover, dependent upon intuition to take sense experience and draw out from it those traits that are typical of

a particular thing or being and transcribe them in elements that are suited to two-dimensional space, namely line and colored surfaces. The Oriental artist would never dream of attempting to convey the entire appearance of things; he is deeply persuaded of the vanity of such an endeavor and, in this sense, the almost childlike naïvety of his works is no less than wisdom.

Let us once more consider perspective, which the history of art takes, quite wrongly, as being synonymous with an "objective" vision of the world, and let us affirm that perspective in no way "adheres" to things as such, but to the individual subject; things perceived are arranged in order according to the subject's "point of vision". The order of things as such is their hierarchy in the entire cosmic order, and this hierarchy is manifested qualitatively and not quantitatively. Mathematical perspective brought rationalism and then individualism into art. This then gave place to passional individualism which, with Baroque art, projected its convulsions into outward forms until it was replaced in its turn by an ever more individualist art which finally retained no more than deliberately subjective "impressions" before disintegrating into the irrational. As opposed to this development of modern European art, the Persian miniature represents a normal view of things, despite its occasional weaknesses; it is "realist" in the traditional meaning of the term, and this means that sensory phenomena do reflect for it the real essence of things.

By reason of its normative character, the Persian miniature can serve to express a contemplative vision; this particular quality is partly due to the Shīʿite milieu in which the boundary between religious law and free inspiration is far less trenchant than in the Sunnī one. We are thinking of certain miniatures with a religious theme such as those which, despite every traditional rule, portray the ascension (*miʿrāj*) of the Prophet through the heavens. By far the most beautiful, and the most spiritual, miniature on this theme is the one which forms part of a manuscript of Niẓāmī's *Khamsah*, dated 1529-43, in the Safavid period. With its convoluted clouds in the Mongol style and its censer-bearing angels reminiscent of *apsaras*, this miniature shows a surprising point of contact between Buddhism and Islam.

It is only right, at this point, that we should devote a few words to clarifying the special nature of Shīʿism. What distinguishes it particularly from Sunnī Islam is its theory of the caliphate, according to which the spiritual authority bestowed by the Prophet upon ʿAlī, his nephew and son-in-law, is perpetuated in the holy *imāms* ("models" or "guides") of his family. The last of the *imāms* known to history—the twelfth according to official Shīʿism—is not dead, but is hidden from the eyes of the world while remaining in spiritual communion with his faithful. This theory is a devotional formulation of an esoteric truth: at each moment of its history, every traditional world is ruled by a "pole" (*quṭb*), which is like the heart, the place where the influence of heaven pours out onto the earthly plane; this "pole" is above all a cosmic and spiritual reality; it coincides with the Divine Presence at the center of the world—or the center of a certain world or, again, of each soul, according to the various levels—but it is normally represented by the saint, or saints, whose spiritual station corresponds to this cosmic and divine "locality". It will be clear from these few observations that Shīʿism involves a very subtle truth, whose formulation in terms that are commonly acceptable leads inevitably to a certain "mythologization", and this is what chiefly characterizes Shīʿite imāmology.

The memory of the time when the *imāms* were still visibly present, the tragic end of certain of them, the occultation of the last one, and the wish to attain to the mysterious region between heaven and earth where he still resides confers upon Shīʿite piety its characteristic tone, which can be described as a poignant nostalgia for paradise, the state of innocence and

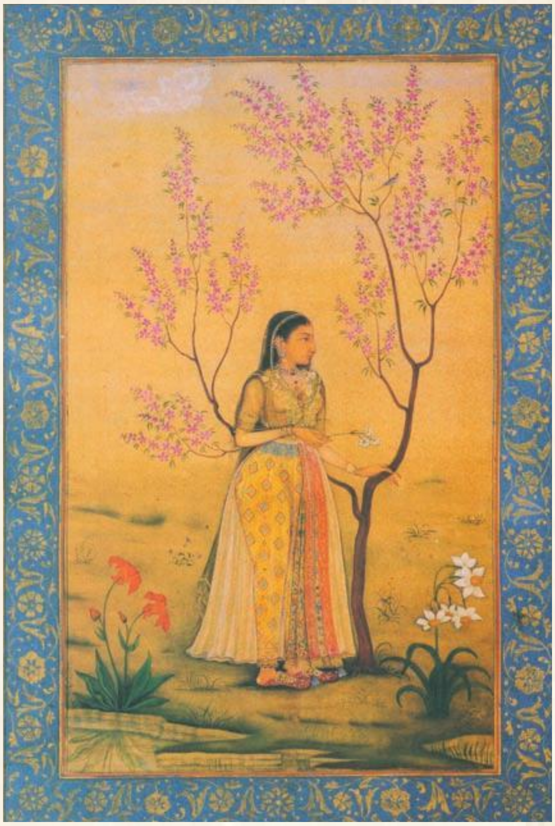


24. The ascension (*miʿrāj*) of the Prophet through the heavens, from a manuscript of Niẓāmī's *Khamsah*, 1529-1543

plenitude that stands at both the beginning and the end of time.

Paradise is an eternal springtime, a garden perpetually in bloom, refreshed by living waters; it is also a final and incorruptible state like precious minerals, crystal and gold. Persian art, and in particular the ornamentation of Safavid mosques, sets out to combine these two qualities: the crystalline state is expressed in the purity of the architectural lines, the perfect geometry of the arched surfaces, and the decoration in rectilinear forms; as for the celestial springtime, it blossoms in the stylized flowers and fresh, rich, and subdued colors of ceramic tiles.

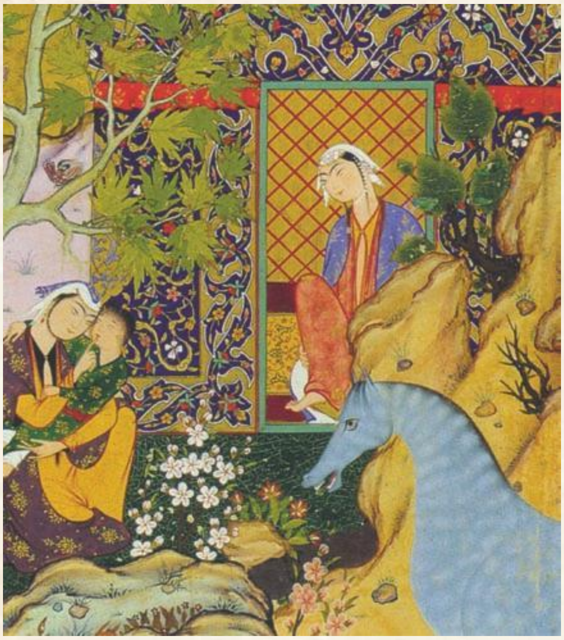
The art of the miniature was more than once revivified by direct contact with Chinese painting, in its beginnings at the time of the first Mongol domination over Iran by the Īl-Khāns (1256-1336), then again under the Timurids (1387-1502), and lastly under the Safavids, who, despite being Persian and liberators from the Mongol yoke, cultivated relations with China. The art of the Persian miniature gave birth to that of the Turkish miniature, which is crude and stereotyped in comparison, except for certain examples which show Mongol influence, like the copy-book of Siyāh-Qalam, the "black calamus", of the fifteenth century A.D. However, the Persian miniature was later perpetuated in Mughal painting which developed into a court art and was used in particular to illustrate the imperial chronicles in a highly detailed and "realistic" style.



25. *A Young Lady Beneath a Tree*. Page from the Dara Shikoh Album, Mughal period, c. 1613

The influence of the Hindu environment, namely, a certain sense of the plastic beauty of the human form, is combined in this painting with impositions of style from the Renaissance in Europe. It is said that Mughal art influenced certain Hindu schools of miniature painting. In fact, however, this cannot amount to anything more than a purely outward and technical stimulus, for these miniatures, which chiefly depict scenes from the life of Krishna, draw directly upon the rich heritage of sacred Hindu art and they do, for this very reason, achieve a spiritual beauty which the essentially worldly Mughal art of painting could never have.

The art of the Persian miniature was already decadent under the Safavids and, more precisely, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. Unfirmly grounded by reason of its peripheral relationship to Islam and its exclusively "courtly" character, it succumbed, at its first contacts with the European art of the period, like a magic goblet whose crystal suddenly tarnishes.



26. *Yūsuf Tends his Flocks* (detail), from Sultan Ibrāhīm Mīrzā's *Haft Awrang*, fol. 110b, 16th century

Notes to Chapter III

1. It is no pleonasm to speak of "idolatrous polytheism", as is shown by Hinduism, which is polytheist but in no way idolatrous, because it recognizes the provisional and symbolic nature of idols and the relative nature of the "gods" (*devas*) as "aspects" of the Absolute. The esoteric Muslims, the Sufis, occasionally compare idols to Divine Names whose significance had been forgotten by the pagans.

2. According to a saying of the Prophet, artists who seek to imitate the work of the Creator will be condemned in the hereafter to give life to their creations, and their inability to do so will cause them to be cast into the worst torments. This saying can clearly be understood in several ways; it has, in fact, never prevented the growth, in certain Muslim circles, of a figurative art free from any claims to naturalism.

3. "Aniconism" can have a spiritually positive character, whereas "iconoclasm" has only a negative sense.

4. From the Islamic point of view, the "divine form" of Adam consists essentially of the seven universal faculties which are likewise attributed to God, namely: life, knowledge, will, power, hearing, seeing, and speech; in man they have limits, but in God none. Even as attributed to man, they cannot be seen, and go beyond his bodily form, which alone can be the object of any art.



27. Maghribī Koran 68: 49-69: 9, written for the Sharīfi Sultan ʿAbd Allāh ibn Muḥammad, Morocco, 1568

Chapter IV

The Common Language of Islamic Art

1 *Arab Art, Islamic Art*

One may well ask whether the term "Arab art" corresponds to a well-defined reality, since Arab art before Islam does not in practice exist for us because of the scarcity of its remains, and Arab art born under the sky of Islam is confused—and one wonders to what degree—with Islamic art itself. Art historians never fail to stress that the first Muslim monuments were not built by the Arabs, who lacked adequate technical means, but by levies of Syrian, Persian, and Greek craftsmen, and that Muslim art was gradually enriched by the artistic heritage of the sedentary populations of the Near East as these were taken into Islam. Despite this, it is still legitimate to speak of Arab art, for the simple reason that Islam itself, if it is not limited to a "racial phenomenon"—and history is there to prove the point—does none the less comprise Arab elements in its formal expression, the foremost of which is the Arabic language; in becoming the sacred language of Islam, Arabic determined to a greater or less degree the "style of thinking" of all the Muslim peoples.[1] Certain typically Arab attitudes of soul, spiritually enhanced by the *Sunnah* (customary usage) of the Prophet, entered into the psychic economy of the entire Muslim world and are reflected in its art. It would, indeed, be impossible to confine the manifestations of Islam to Arabism; on the contrary, it is Arabism that is expanded and, as it were, transfigured by Islam.

In order to grasp the nature of Islamic-Arab art—the Muslim will naturally stress the first part of this term, and the non-Muslim the second—it is always necessary to take account of this marriage between a spiritual message with an absolute content and a certain racial inheritance which, for that very reason, no longer belongs to a racially defined collectivity but becomes a "mode of expression" which can, in principle, be used universally. Moreover, Islamic-Arab art is not the only great religious art to be born from such a marriage; Buddhist art, for example, whose area of expression is chiefly confined to Mongol nations, nevertheless preserves certain typically Indian traits, particularly in its iconography, which is of the greatest importance to it. In a far more restricted context, Gothic art, of German-Latin lineage, provides an example of a "style" so widespread that it became identified, from a certain moment on, with the Christian art of the West.

Without Islam, the Arab thrust of the seventh century—even supposing it to have been possible without the religious impulse—would have been no more than an episode in the history of the Middle East; decadent as they may have been, the great sedentary civilizations would have made short work of absorbing these hordes of Bedouin Arabs, and the nomadic invaders of the cultivated lands would have finished, as is generally the case, by accepting the customs and forms of expression of the sedentaries. But it was exactly the opposite that happened in the case of Islam, at least in a certain regard: it was the Arabs, nomads for the most part, who imposed on the sedentary peoples they conquered their forms of thought and expression by imposing their language upon them.[2] In fact, the outstanding, and somehow refulgent, manifestation of the Arab genius is language, including writing. It was this language which not only preserved the ethnic heritage of the Arabs outside Arabia, but caused it to radiate far beyond its racial homeland. It was by the mediation of the Arabic language

that the essential Arab genius was effectively communicated to Muslim civilization as a whole.

The extraordinary normative power of the Arabic language derives from its role as a sacred language as well as from its archaic nature, both factors being, in any case, connected. It is its archaic quality that predestined Arabic for its role as a sacred language, and it was the Koranic revelation that, as it were, actualized its primordial substance. Archaism, in the linguistic order, is not, in any event, synonymous with simplicity of structure, very much to the contrary. Languages generally grow poorer with the passing of time by gradually losing the richness of their vocabulary, the ease with which they can diversify various aspects of one and the same idea, and their power of synthesis, which is the ability to express many things with few words. In order to make up for this impoverishment, modern languages have become more complicated on the rhetorical level; while perhaps gaining in surface precision, they have not done so as regards content. Language historians are astonished by the fact that Arabic was able to retain a morphology attested to as early as the Code of Hammurabi,[3] from the nineteenth to the eighteenth century before the Christian era, and to retain a phonetic system which preserves, with the exception of a single sound, the extremely rich sound-range disclosed by the most ancient Semitic alphabets discovered,[4] although there was no "literary tradition" to bridge the gap between the far-off age of the Patriarchs and the time when the Koranic revelation would establish the language for all time.

The explanation of this perennial quality of Arabic is to be found simply in the conserving role of nomadism. It is in towns that languages decay, by becoming worn out, like the things and institutions they designate. Nomads, who live to some extent outside time, conserve their language better; it is, moreover, the only treasure they can carry around with them in their pastoral existence; the nomad is a jealous



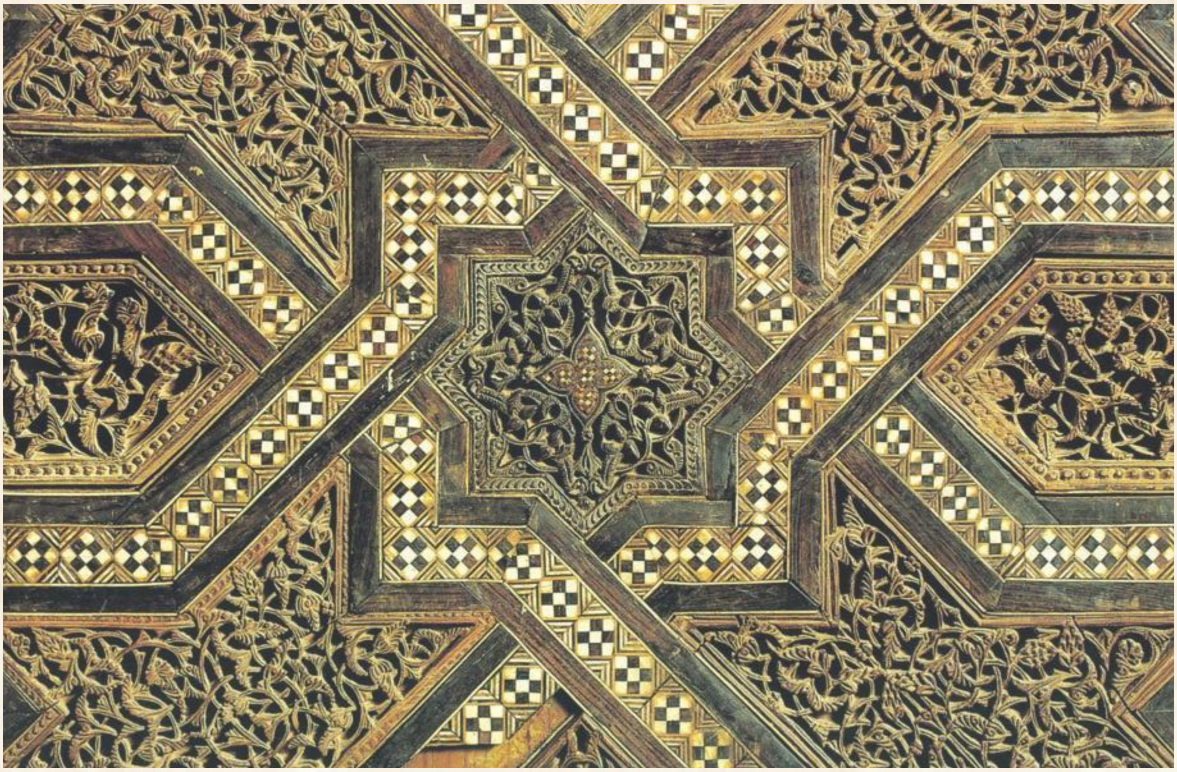
28. *Subḥān Allāh al-Aẓīm wa bi-ḥamdih* ("Glory and praise to God Supreme") and *Subḥān Allāh wa'l ḥamdu li-'Llāh wa lā ilāha illā 'Llāh wa'Llāhu Akbar* ("Glory to God; praise to God; there is no divinity save God; God is most great"). Kūfī calligraphy in a combination of glazed and unglazed bricks; shrine of Khwājah ʿAbd-Allāh Anṣārī, Gāzar-Gāh, Herat, Afghanistan, 1428

guardian of his linguistic heritage, his poetry, and his rhetorical art. On the other hand, his inheritance in the way of visual art cannot be rich; architecture presupposes stability, and the same is broadly true of sculpture and painting. Nomadic art in general is limited to simple, yet striking, graphic formulae, ornamental motifs, heraldic emblems, and symbols. In the situation we are studying, the existence of these formulae is by no means a negligible factor, for they carry creative potentialities that will blossom forth when they meet the artistic techniques belonging to the sedentary civilizations. It is true that the presence of these model formulae among the pre-Islamic Arabs is not generally apparent except retrospectively, by analogy with what we find with other nomads and in consideration of the sudden flowering in the Muslim art of the first centuries of ornamental motifs which are vastly different in their modes from anything coming from the sedentary civilizations and which are, in some way, parallel to the figurative "devices" of the Arab language.

In order to explain in a few words, and without recourse to specialized linguistic knowledge, the specific nature of the Arabic language, let us first of all recall that every language has at its beginnings two poles, as it were, one of which comes to predominate without excluding the other. These two poles can be described by the terms "auditive intuition" and "imaginative intuition". Auditive intuition essentially identifies the meaning of a word with its quality as sound; this presents itself as the development of a simple phonetic formula which expresses a fundamental action such as "to unite", "to separate", "to penetrate", "to emerge", and so on, with all the physical, psychological, and intellectual polyvalence of which a type-action of this kind is capable. This has, moreover, nothing to do with semantic convention or onomatopoeia; the identification of sound and act is immediate and spontaneous, and in this regard, speech conceives everything it names as being basically an act or as the object of an act. Imaginative intuition, on the contrary, manifests itself in speech



29. Carved inscription of the name of Muḥammad, Mausoleum of Sultan Uljaytu, Sultaniyah, Persia

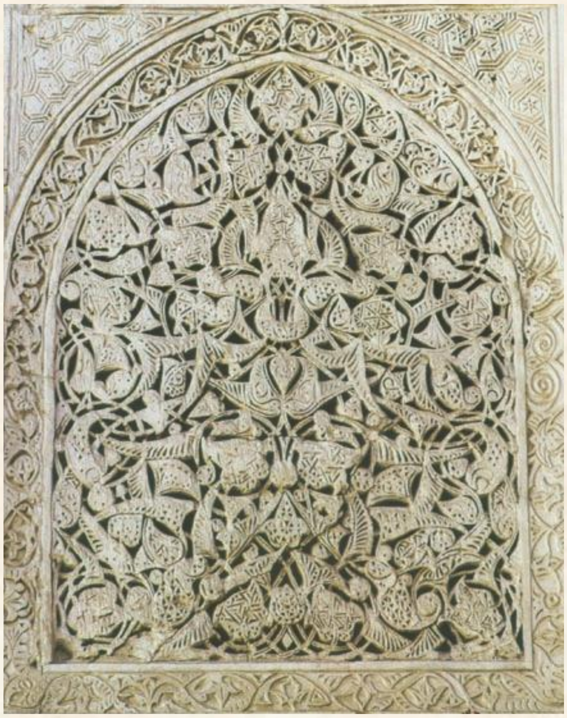


30. Detail from the wooden *minbar* of the Kutūbiyyah Mosque, Marrakesh, Morocco, Almoravid period, 1125-1130



31. Detail from the *minbar* of the Mausoleum of Qāytbāy, Cairo, Egypt, 1472-1474

by the semantic associations of analogous images; every word pronounced evokes inwardly a corresponding image, which calls up other images, with the type-images dominating the more particular ones, according to a hierarchy that stamps itself, in its turn, on the structure of speech. The Latin languages are examples of this latter type, whereas Arabic discloses an almost untrammeled auditive intuition or phonetic logic, in which the identity of sound and act, as well as the primacy of action, are affirmed across the entire rich tissue of this language. In principle, every Arabic word is derived from a verb consisting of three invariable consonants, something like an aural ideogram, from which are derived as many as twelve different verbal modes—simple, causative, intensive, reciprocal, and so on—and each of these modes produces in its turn a plethora of nouns and adjectives whose first meaning is always linked, in a more or less direct way, to that of the fundamental action depicted by the trilateral root[5] of the entire verbal "tree".



32. Stucco window grille from the Ḥanbalī Mosque in Damascus, Syria, 1297

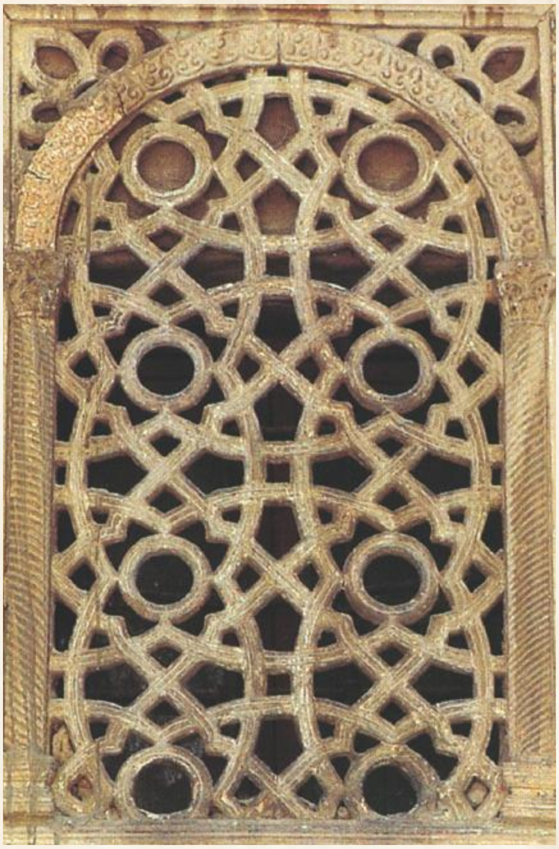
This semantic transparency of the language, the fact that in its symbolism it flows wholly from the phonetic character of the verb, is a clear proof of its relative primordiality. In the beginning, and in the very seat of our consciousness, things are spontaneously conceived as determinations of the primordial sound which resounds in the heart, this sound being none other than the first, non-individualized, act of consciousness; at this level, or in this state, to "name" a thing is to identify oneself with the action or the sound which brings it forth.[6] The symbolism inherent in speech—and obscured or deformed to a greater or lesser extent by acquired habits—seizes on the nature of things not in a static fashion, as an image is seized but, as it were, *in statu nasciendi*, in the act of becoming. This aspect of language in general, and of the Arabic language in particular is moreover, in the Muslim world, the object of a whole gamut of sciences, some philosophical and others esoteric. Muslim scholars can be said not only to have conserved this structure of Arabic, but even to have contributed to its precise definition.

In Arabic, the "tree" of verbal forms, of derivations from certain "roots", is quite inexhaustible; it can always bring forth new leaves, new expressions to represent hitherto dormant variations of the basic idea—or action. This explains why this Bedouin tongue was able to become the linguistic vehicle of an entire civilization intellectually very rich and differentiated.

Let us point out, nevertheless, that the logical link between a form of expression and its verbal root is not always easy to grasp, because of the occasionally conventionalized meaning given to that particular form and the extremely complex significance of the root idea. One orientalist has gone so far as to say that "the structure of the Arabic language would be of incomparable transparency were the meanings of the verbal roots not arbitrary"; but it is actually hardly possible for the basis of a language to be arbitrary. The truth is that the verbal roots constitute a threshold between discursive thought

and a kind of synthetic perception.[7] The Arabic language is, as it were, dependent upon auditive intuition, and we shall see, in what follows, what this signifies for art.

It would be tempting to say that the Arab does not so much see things as hear them, but that would be a false generalization. It is true, nevertheless, that the need for artistic exteriorization is, in the Arab, largely absorbed by the cultivation of his language with its fascinating phonetic range and almost unlimited possibilities of expression. If the term contemplative be taken to describe the type of man who contemplates rather than acts and whose mind loves to repose in the being of things, then the Arab, who possesses a dynamic mentality and an analytical intelligence, is no contemplative. But that he is nevertheless contemplative is proved by Islam and confirmed by Arab art. Contemplation is not, in any case, limited to simply static modes; it can pursue unity through rhythm, which is like a reflection of the eternal present in the flow of time.



33. Stone window grille from the Great Umayyad Mosque at Damascus, Syria

Plastic examples illustrating these tendencies leap to the eye. The arabesque in particular, with its both regular and indefinite unfolding, is the most direct expression of rhythm in the visual order. It is true that its most perfect forms are inconceivable without the artistic contribution of the nomads of Central Asia; it was, however, in an Arab milieu that it flowered most resplendently. Another element which is typical of Muslim art, and whose development goes side by side with Arab domination, is interlacement. It first appears in all its perfection in the form of sculptured trellis-work on the windows of mosques and palaces.[8] In order to appreciate the geometrical play of interlacement, it is not enough simply to look at it head on; it must be "read", by letting the eye follow the flow of intertwining and compensating forces. Interlacement exists already in the pavement mosaics of late antiquity, but it is rudimentary and naturalistic in conception, without any of the complexity and rhythmic precision of Arab-Muslim interlacing work. These examples belong to abstract art, which is itself characteristic of the Arab genius. Contrary to what is customarily believed, the average Arab does not by any means possess an "extravagant imagination". Whenever such imagination is found in Arab literature, in the *Tales of the Thousand and One Nights* for example, it comes from some non-Arab source, Persian and Indian in this case; only the art of storytelling is Arab. The creative spirit of the Arabs is *a priori* logical and rhetorical, then rhythmic and incantational. The luxuriance of typically Arab poetry lies in mental and verbal arabesque and not in the profusion of images evoked.

Islam rejects portraiture for the theological reasons we have described (see Chapter III, 1). Now it is a fact that the Semitic nomads had



34. Tilework detail from a window in the dome of the Shaykh Luṭf-Allāh Mosque, Iṣfahān, Persia

no figurative tradition—the pre-Islamic Arabs imported most of their idols from abroad—and the image never became a natural and transparent means of expression for the Arabs. Verbal reality eclipsed the reality of static vision: compared with the word forever "in act", whose root is anchored in the primordiality of sound, a painted or a carved image seemed like a disquieting congealment of the spirit. For the pagan Arabs, it smacked of magic.

The Arabic language is not wholly dynamic; true, its base is the action-verb, but it possesses likewise a static, or more exactly a timeless, ground which corresponds with "being", and which reveals itself particularly in the so-called nominal sentence, where the noun and its predicates are juxtaposed without a copula, thereby permitting a thought to be expressed in lapidary fashion and without any consideration of time. The Arabic language is such that a whole doctrine can be condensed into a short and concise formula of diamantine clarity. This means of expression is realized in all its fullness only in the Koran; yet it is part of the Arab genius none the less, and is reflected in Arab-Muslim art, for this art is not only rhythmical, it is also crystalline.

The conciseness of the Arabic sentence does not, quite clearly, limit the profundity of the meaning, but neither does it facilitate synthesis on the descriptive level: an Arab will rarely assemble a number of conditions or circumstances in a single sentence; he prefers to string together a series of brief phrases. In this respect, an agglutinative language like Turkish, which belongs to the family of Mongol languages, is less austere and more flexible than Arabic; when it comes to describing a situation or a landscape, Turkish is frankly superior to Arabic, and the same applies to Persian which is an Indo-European language close to Gothic; however, both languages have borrowed not only their theological terminology, but also their philosophical and scientific terms, from Arabic.

The opposite extreme to Arabic is a language like Chinese, which is ruled by a static vision of things and which groups the elements of a thought around generic images, as is shown by the ideographic nature of Chinese script.

The Turks, like the Arabs, were originally nomads, but their languages reveal vastly different mental types; the Arab is incisive and dynamic in his thought processes; the Turk, for his part, is all-embracing and circumspect. In the general framework of Muslim art, the Turkish genius reveals itself by a certain power of synthesis—one might almost say, by a totalitarian spirit. The Turk has a plastic or sculptural gift which the Arab does not have; his works always proceed out of an all-enveloping concept; they are as if hewn from a single block.

As for Persian art, it is distinguished by its sense of hierarchical gradations; Persian

architecture is perfectly articulated, without ever being "functional" in the modern sense of the term. For the Persian, Unity manifests itself above all as harmony. Moreover, Persians are by nature and by culture people who see things, but see with lyrical eyes; their artistic activity is as if animated by an inner melody. It is said proverbially in the East that "Arabic is the language of God, but Persian is the language of paradise", and this describes very well the difference that exists, for example, between a distinctively Arab type of architecture, like that of the Maghrib, where crystalline geometry of forms proclaims the unitary principle, and Persian architecture with its blue domes and floral decoration.



35. Dome of the Darb-i-Imām Mausoleum, Iṣfahān, Persia

The Arab architect is not afraid of monotony; he will build pillar upon pillar and arcade upon arcade and dominate repetition by rhythmic alternation and the qualitative perfection of each element.

The language of the Koran is omnipresent in the World of Islam; the entire life of a Muslim is filled with Koranic formulae, prayers, litanies, and invocations in Arabic, the elements of which are drawn from the Sacred Book; innumerable inscriptions bear witness to this. It could be said that this ubiquity of the Koran works like a spiritual vibration—there is no better term to describe an influence which is both spiritual and sonorous—and this vibration necessarily determines the modes and measures of Muslim art; the plastic art of Islam is therefore, in a certain way, the reflection of the word of the Koran. It is assuredly very difficult to grasp the principle by which this art is linked to the text of the Koran, not on the narrative plane, which plays no part in the customary art of Islam, but on the level of formal structures, since the Koran obeys no laws of composition, neither in the strangely disconnected linking together of its themes, nor in its verbal presentation, which evades all the rules of meter. Its rhythm, powerful and penetrating as it is, follows no fixed measure; entirely unpredictable, it maintains at times an insistent rhyme like the beat of a drum and will then suddenly modify its breadth and pace, shifting its cadences in a manner as unexpected as it is striking. To affirm that the Koran is Arabic verse, because it includes passages with a uniform rhyme like the Bedouin *rajaz*, would be mistaken; but to deny that these uniformities and abrupt breaks correspond to profound realities in the Arab soul, would be equally so. Arab art—poetry and music as well as the plastic arts—loves to repeat certain forms and to introduce sudden and unforeseen variants against this repetitive background. But, whereas art is played out in

accordance with easily fathomable rules, the waves of sacred speech may sometimes fall in regular patterns but they arise out of a whole formless ocean. In the same way, the state of inner harmony engendered by the words and sonorous enchantment of the Koran is situated on quite another plane than, for example, perfect poetry. The Koran does not satisfy, it gives and at the same time takes away, it expands the soul by lending it wings then lays it low and leaves it naked; for the believer, it is both comforting and purifying, like a rainstorm. Purely human art does not possess this virtue. That is to say, there is no such thing as a Koranic style which can simply be transposed into art; but there does exist a state of soul which is sustained by the recitation of the Koran and which favors certain formal manifestations while precluding others. The diapason of the Koran never fails to join intoxicating nostalgia to extreme sobriety: it is a radiation of the divine Sun on the human desert. It is to these poles that the fluid and flamboyant rhythm of the arabesque, and the abstract and crystalline character of architecture, in some way correspond; we shall come back to these two poles time and again.



36. Detail of the façade of the mausoleum built by Master ʿAlī of Nasaf, Shāh-i-Zindah, Samarqand, Uzbekistan

But the most profound link between Islamic art and the Koran is of another kind: it lies not in the form of the Koran but in its *ḥaqīqah*, its formless essence, and more particularly in the notion of *tawḥīd*, unity or union, with its contemplative implications; Islamic art—by which we mean the entirety of plastic arts in Islam—is essentially the projection into the visual order of certain aspects or dimensions of Divine Unity.



37. Inscription in tilework: "In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate", in the sanctuary of Khwājah ʿAbd-Allāh Anṣārī, Gāzar-Gāh, Herat, Afghanistan, 15th century

2 Arabic Calligraphy

The art of Arabic writing is by definition the most Arab of all the plastic arts of Islam. It belongs nevertheless to the entire Islamic world, and is even considered to be the most noble of the arts, because it gives visible form to the revealed word of the Koran. Princes and princesses practiced copying out the Sacred Book in beautiful script. Calligraphy is also the art most widely shared by all Muslims, since anyone who can write is in a position to appreciate the merits of a good calligrapher, and it can be said without fear of exaggeration that nothing has typified the aesthetic sense of the Muslim peoples as much as the Arabic script. One needs to be familiar with its forms and styles in order to follow the full sweep of the art, particularly in architectural ornamentation which is frequently dominated by epigraphy.

We can give the measure of Arabic calligraphy, which is so astonishingly rich in style and modes, if we say that it knows how to combine the greatest geometrical strictness with the most melodious rhythm. And in saying this we also define the two poles between which this art evolves and which it succeeds in reconciling in various ways and various styles, each of which represents a perfect graphic balance and each of which is consistently valid. For one of the typical characteristics of Arabic calligraphy is that none of its various styles, born at different periods, has even fallen into disuse; calligraphy turns to each of them, depending on the nature and context of texts, and does not hesitate, should the occasion arise, to place inscriptions in contrasting styles side by side.

This multiform character of Arab calligraphy might tempt one to compare it with the calligraphy of the Far East—also one of the pinnacles of the art of writing—were not Chinese script at the antipodes of Arabic script. As is well known, Chinese script is based on pictography, in which each sign is like the image of a distinct idea, whereas Arabic script is purely phonetic, perhaps the most rigorously phonetic script that exists. This means that the stylization of the Arabic letters is of an entirely abstract kind, without any figurative root. The techniques employed in the respective types of writing are, moreover, entirely different. Far Eastern writing, Japanese or Chinese, prefers the brush, whose strokes of varying lightness or heaviness are balanced out in the composition of each ideogram; but the Arab writes with the calamus—a reed trimmed to a double point—with which he traces out precise and frequently interlacing lines; he has no inclination to isolate the signs but prefers to integrate them in a continuous rhythm without, however, keeping distinct forms on single levels; in fact the whole charm of Arabic calligraphy lies in the way it can combine the distinctive shape of the characters with the fluidity of the whole.

Chinese characters unfold vertically, from the top to the bottom; they imitate the movement of a theogony descending from heaven to earth. As for Arabic script, it proceeds horizontally, on the plane of becoming, but starts from the right, which is the field of action, and moves to the left, which is the region of the heart; it therefore describes a progression from the outward to the inward.

The successive lines of a text can be compared to the weft of a piece of cloth. In fact, the symbolism of writing is cognate with that of weaving; both refer to the crossing of the cosmic axes. In order to understand this allusion, it is necessary to imagine the primitive craft of weaving with the threads of the warp held vertically and the weft uniting them horizontally by the to-and-fro movement of the shuttle, which recalls the devolution of the cycle of days, months, or years, whereas the immobility of the warp corresponds to the immobility of the polar axis. This axis is, in reality, one alone, but its image is repeated in all the threads of the warp in the same ways as the present instant, which remains always one, appears to repeat itself through time.

As in weaving, the horizontal movement of the script, which is a rippling movement,

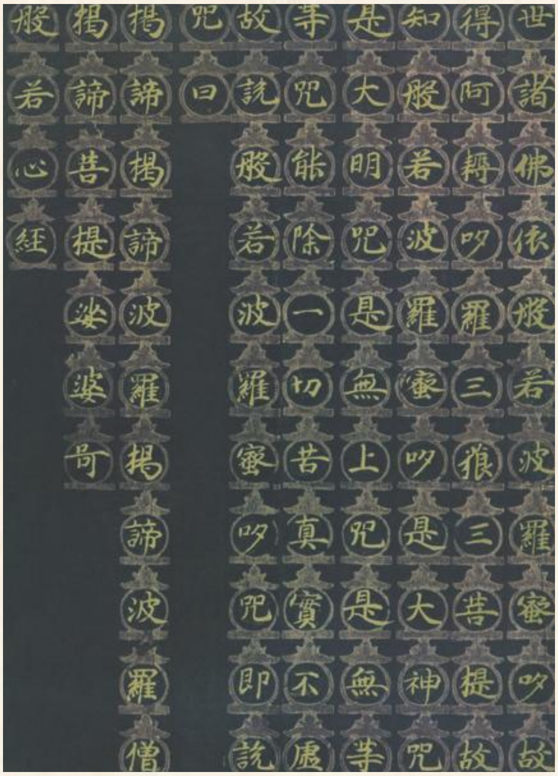
Opposite: 38. Koran 1: 1-4; calligraphy in Muḥaqqaq style with *sūrah* headings in ornamental Eastern Kūfī, written by Mubārak Shāh, 1320-1330

سورة فاتحة الكتاب

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

الحمد لله رب العالمين الرحمن الرحيم

ملك يوم الدين إياك نعبد وإياك

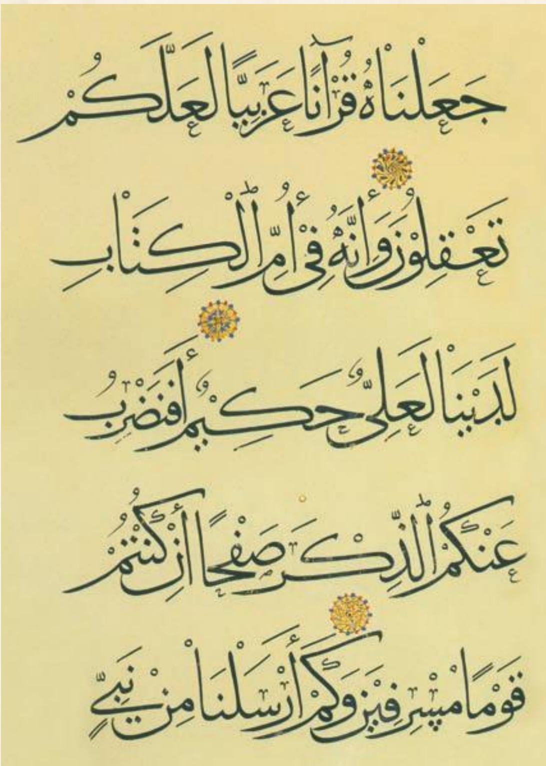


corresponds to change and becoming, whereas the vertical represents the dimension of the Essence or the immutable essences.

Now this is important. Each of the two dimensions "separates" in the same respect as the other "unites". Thus, for example, the horizontal movement of the script, its aspect of "becoming", tends to confuse and level out the essential forms of the various letters; but, on the other hand, the horizontal shafts of these letters "transcend" and interrupt the flow of the writing. The vertical is therefore seen to unite in the sense that it affirms the one and only Essence, and the horizontal divides in the sense that it spreads out into multiplicity.

It may well appear that these considerations have gone beyond the subject-matter; but actually they show the basis of all graphic symbolism and thereby permit all the various styles of Arabic script to be given their due place.

Arabic writing is derived from the Syriac or Nabatean alphabet and its existence thus precedes Islam, but it possessed, at the dawn of Islam, no more than a rather rudimentary character; a large number of letters looked alike and, since vowels were not indicated, the meaning of many words could often be





Top: **39**. Page from the *Hannya Shinkyō Sūtra*, Nara, Japan, late Heian period; *Bottom left*: **40**. Koran 43: 3-6, calligraphy in Muḥaqqaq style, written by Aḥmad ibn ash-Shaykh as-Suhrawardī, Baghdad, 1304; *Bottom right*: **41**. Plate with Kūfī inscription, Nishapur or Samarqand, 10th century

made out only by the context. The evolution of writing had therefore to proceed necessarily in the direction of greater differentiation. At the same time, it embraced the symbolical scheme we have just described. A "hieratic" trend which readily accentuates the distinctive shapes of each letter is counterbalanced by the naturally inherent tendency of the script to blend the whole into a continuous rhythm. Two styles of writing have co-existed since the first centuries of Islam: Kūfī, which is distinguished by the static nature of the letters, and a kind of cursive script, Naskhī, with forms of varying fluidity. Kūfī, named after the town of Kufa, one of the main centers of Arab culture in the days of the Umayyads, was often used for the calligraphy of the Koran.[9] It combines a great exactitude of strokes with a love of geometrical synthesis, which does not make it easy to read. We should point out that it is possible in Arabic to bring together groups of letters and form them into the appearance of a single sign.

Kūfī gave birth to several variants which are principally used in architectural decoration, such as rectangular Kūfī, which can be "built up" in units like bricks, floriate Kūfī, which is also found in the art of books, especially on the title pages, and Kūfī with interlacing shafts, which has become one of the favorite ornamental motifs in Maghrib art, particularly in the art of chiseled plasterwork.

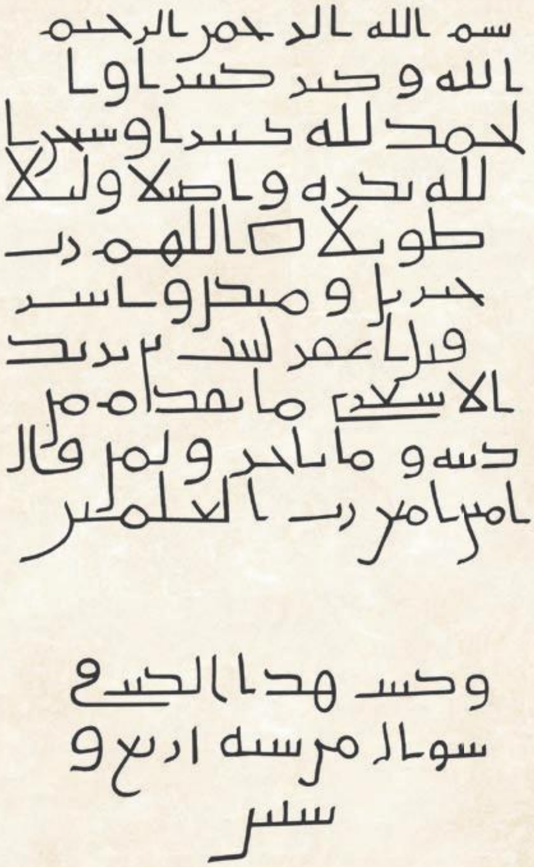


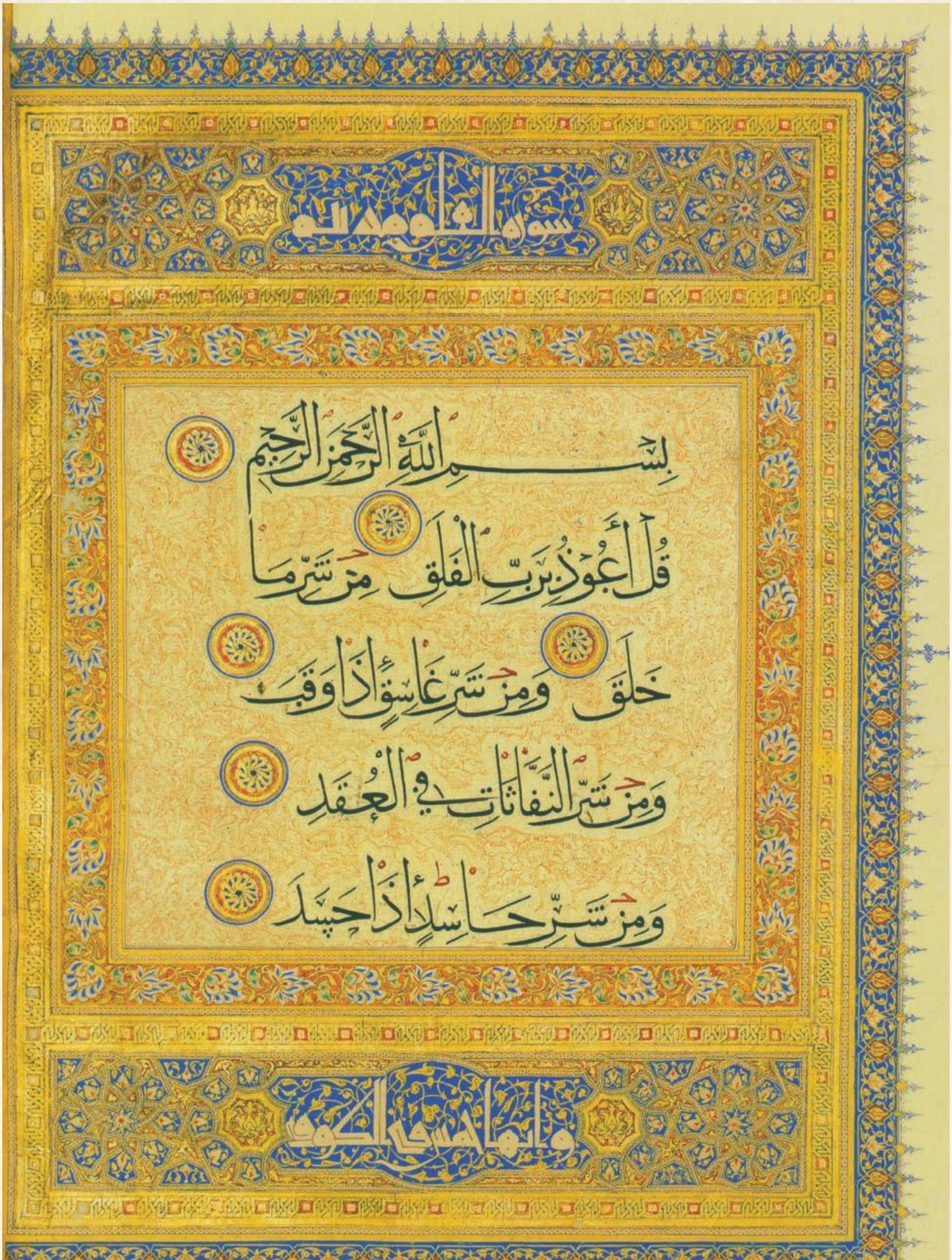
Figure 17: Arabic script: inscription from Karbala, dated 74 A. H. (693 A.D.)



42. Koran in Kūfī script copied in Kairouan, Tunisia, 9th-10th century



43. Example of interlaced Kūfī script from the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain



44. Koran 113: 1-5, calligraphy in Muḥaqqaq style with *sūrah* headings in ornamental Eastern Kūfī, Cairo, Egypt, 1368

The opposition between the two trends in calligraphy—the one accentuating the static form of letters and the other blending them in a continuous flow—is never absolute; in every phase of development, syntheses were made, such as the Muḥaqqaq whose entire beauty lies in the fact that the polarization of both trends is carried to the extreme limit, without, however, destroying the unity of the whole; the incisive repetition of the verticals, brought about chiefly by elongating the shafts of the *alif* and the *lām*, is echoed, along the horizontal flow, by the descant of ample and varied curves. Transposed to the monumental order and used for the epigraphy of the Koran, this script is like an indefatigable attestation of the Divine Unity accompanied by joyful and serene expansion of the soul.

Calligraphers recognize certain rules of proportion for each style. The unit of measure is the "point" (or dot) which is equal to the diacritical point beneath the letter *bāʾ*. The greatest vertical extension is that of the letter *alif*, composed of a certain number of points. The greatest horizontal extension is determined by the lower half of a circle whose diameter is the length of the *alif*.



Figure 18: Measure of letters in dots

The various ethnic milieux have made their mark in writing. Thus, the Persians developed a kind of pearl-like cursive, of an almost aerial fluidity, with which to write their language in Arabic script. The extreme opposite, in the graphic order, is the writing of the Maghrib, whose area of diffusion extends from Muslim Spain to the African Sahil and which has preserved a relatively ancient synthesis of Kūfī and Naskhī. Its style is both virile and generous, with angular outlines, both horizontal and vertical, well emphasized and accompanied by large curves open at the top.

Turkish calligraphy, which is very rich, does not differ essentially from Eastern Arabic calligraphy, but it loves to compose kinds of "magic knots" and graphic emblems, by symmetrical reduplication, which are somehow reminiscent of Mongol art.

In parentheses, we should not forget the very curious fusion of Arabic script with Chinese calligraphic style which is found among the Muslims of Sinkiang; it is here that two extremes meet.

In architectural decoration and even in the art of books, calligraphy is frequently married to the arabesque. One of the most happy combinations of this kind is of Kūfī with vertical shafts and vine tendrils twining in an unbroken flow. The tendrils occasionally flow directly out of the letters, and this is without doubt the origin of floriate Kūfī.

The bringing together of writing and stylized vegetation evokes the analogy which exists between the "book of the world" and the "world-tree", two symbols well known to Muslim esoterism. The first of these originates in the Koran, while the second is common to various Asian traditions. Besides, it flows from the very nature of things.

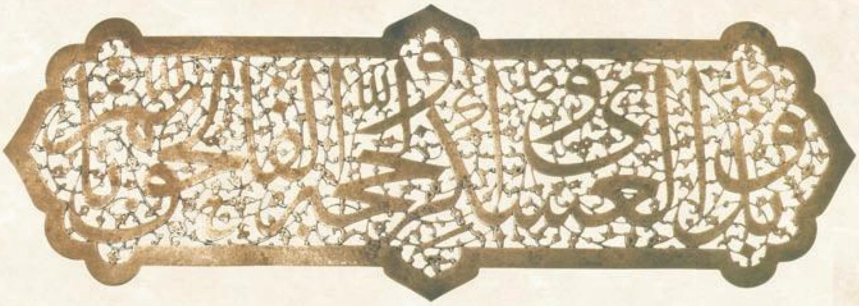
The universe is both a revealed book and a tree whose leaves and branches unfold from a single trunk. The letters of the revealed book are like the leaves of the tree, and just as these are linked to the branches and finally to the trunk, so too are the letters linked to words, then to sentences, and finally to the total and single truth of the book.

Let us also mention, in this order of ideas, the Koranic symbol of the "Supreme Pen" which inscribes the destiny of all beings on the "Guarded Tablet"; the Pen (or Calamus) is none other than the Divine Spirit or the Universal Spirit, and the greatest title of nobility accorded to the art of writing is the fact that it is like the distant shadow of the Divine Act.



45. Inscription in monumental Kūfī script combined with arabesque, from the Sultan Ḥasan Madrasah, Cairo, Egypt





Left: **46**. Illuminated page of a mirror script in the form of a knot, from a poetry anthology by Jāmī, Turkey, 15th century
Right: **47**. An inscribed openwork steel plaque, Persia, Safavid period, late 17th century



48. Two inscriptions in contrasting styles: fluid Naskhī and rectangular Kūfī, at the entrance of the *khānaqāh* in Natanz, Persia, 14th century



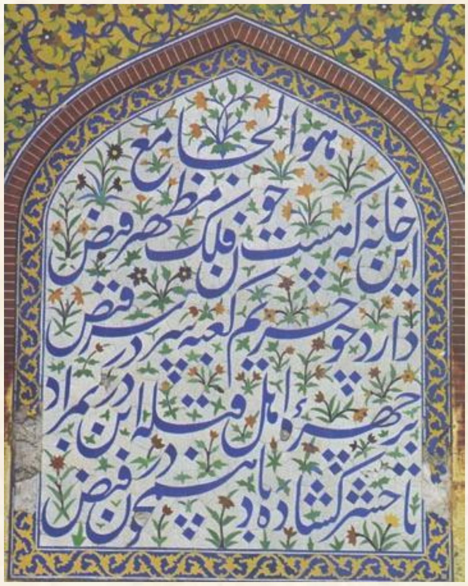
49. Tilework inscription in rectangular Kūfī from the dome of the Shaykh Luṭf-Allāh Mosque, Iṣfahān, Persia



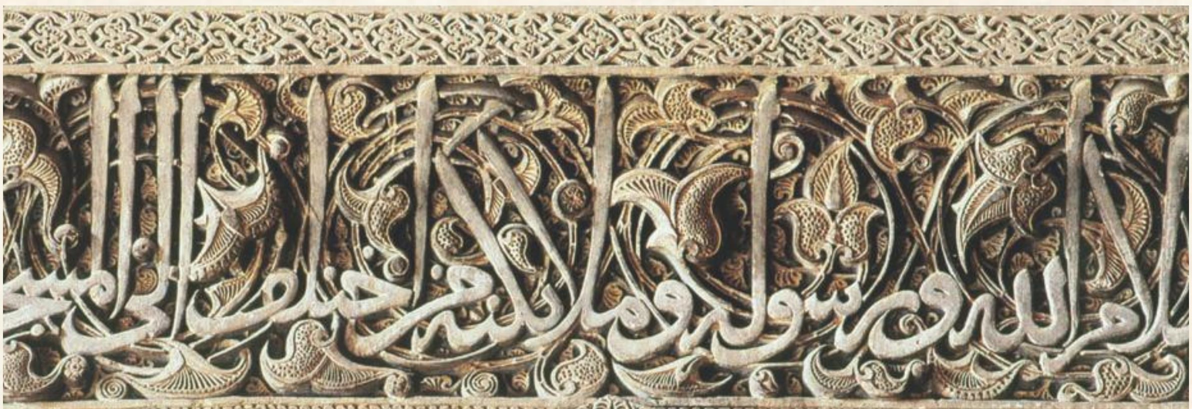
50. Kūfī and Naskhī inscription from a wooden *minbar* in the Eşrefoğlu Mosque, Beyşehir, Turkey, 13th century



51. Inscription in Thuluth and Kūfī scripts combined with arabesque decoration, from the Friday Mosque of Kerman, Persia



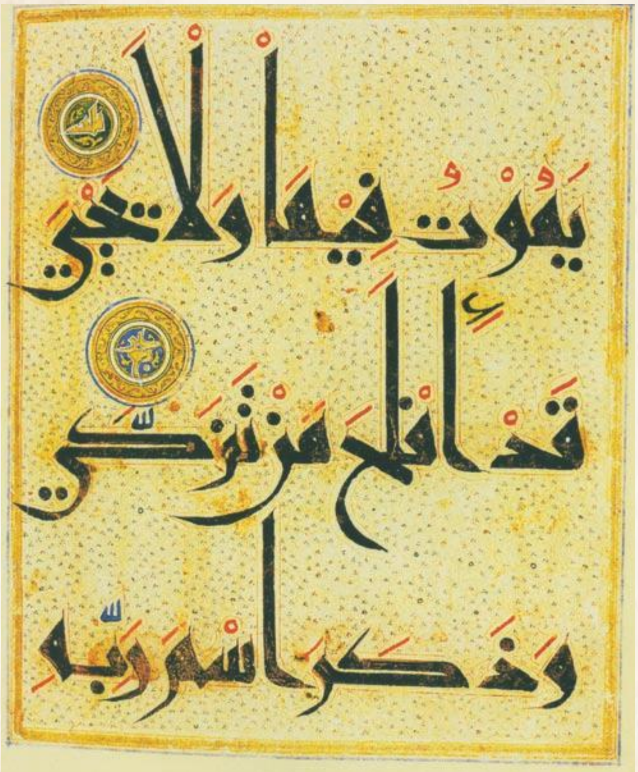
52. Tilework inscription from the Wazīr Khān Mosque, Lahore, Pakistan, 17th century



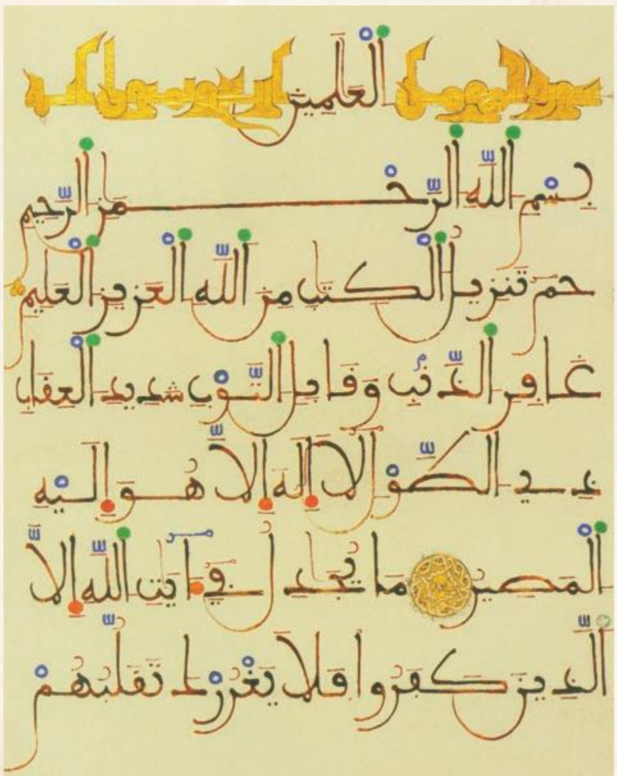
53. Inscription in the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) in Iṣfahān, Persia. The spiral background motifs terminate in foliated scrolls



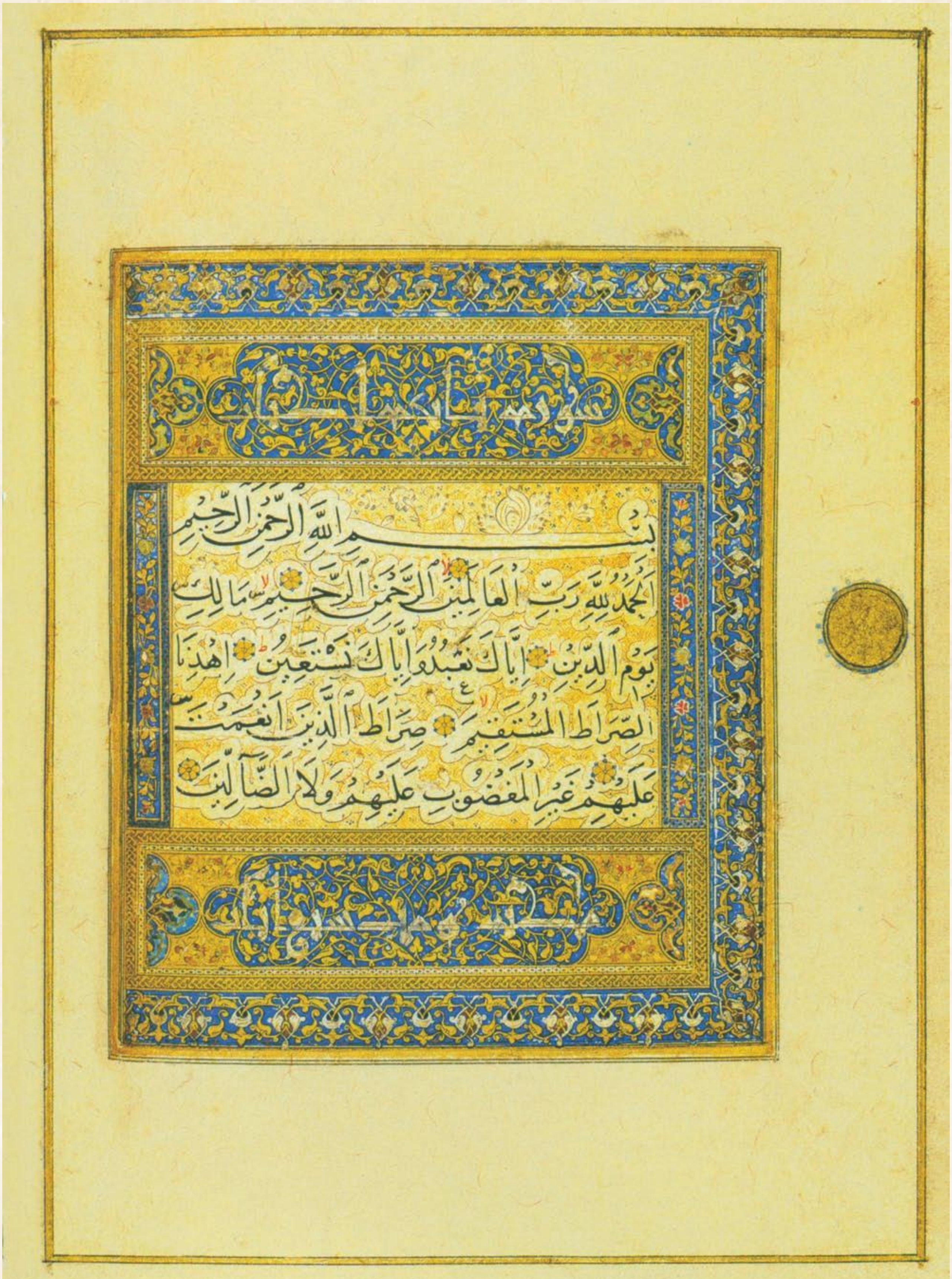
54. A leaflet of a Kūfī Koran with gold lettering on blue parchment, Kairouan, Tunisia, mid 10th century



55. Koran 87: 13-15, Eastern Kūfī script, Iraq or Persia, early 11th century



56. Koran 39: 75-40: 2, Maghribī script on vellum, Spain, 13th century

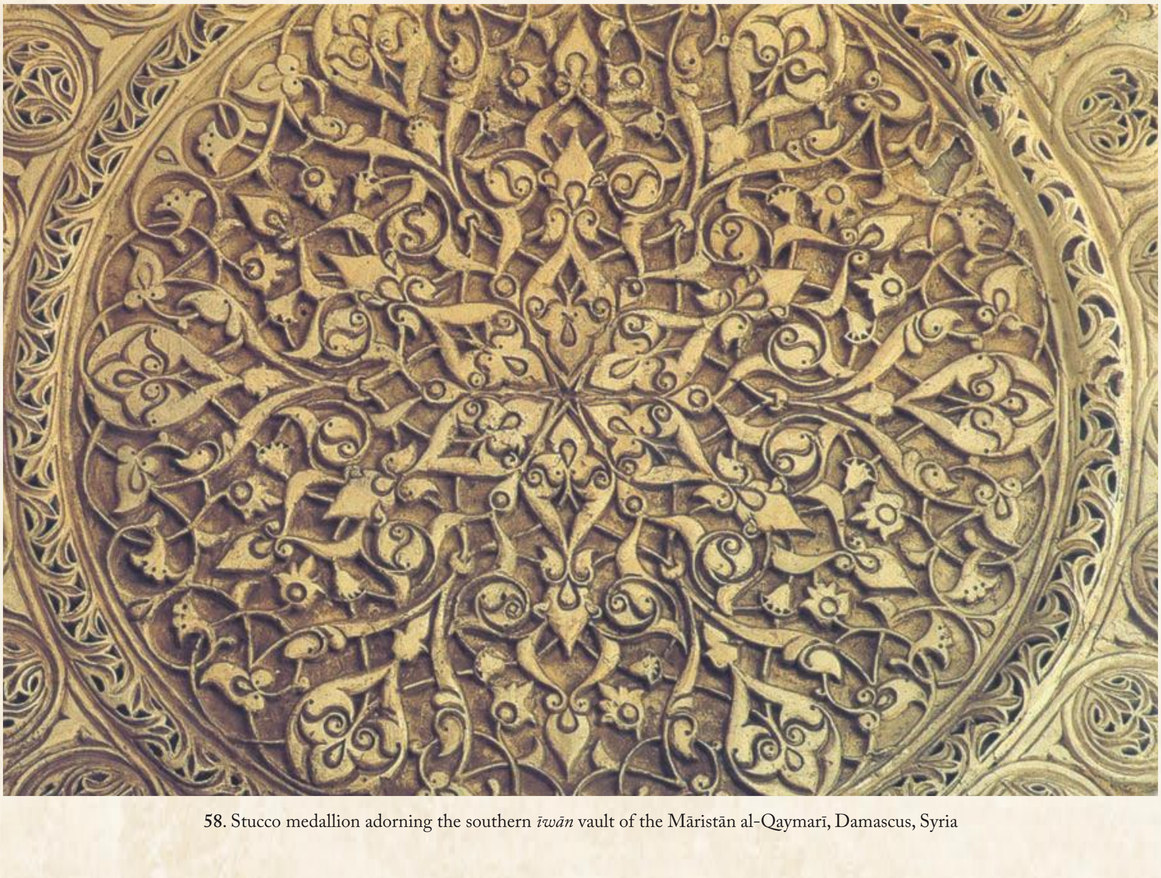

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
الحمد لله رب العالمين الرحمن الرحيم مالك
يوم الدين اياك نعبد واياك نستعين اهدنا
الصراط المستقيم صراط الذين انعمت
عليهم غير المغضوب عليهم ولا الضالين

57. Koran 1, Naskhī script with *sūrah* headings in ornamental Thuluth, Iraq or Persia, 15th century

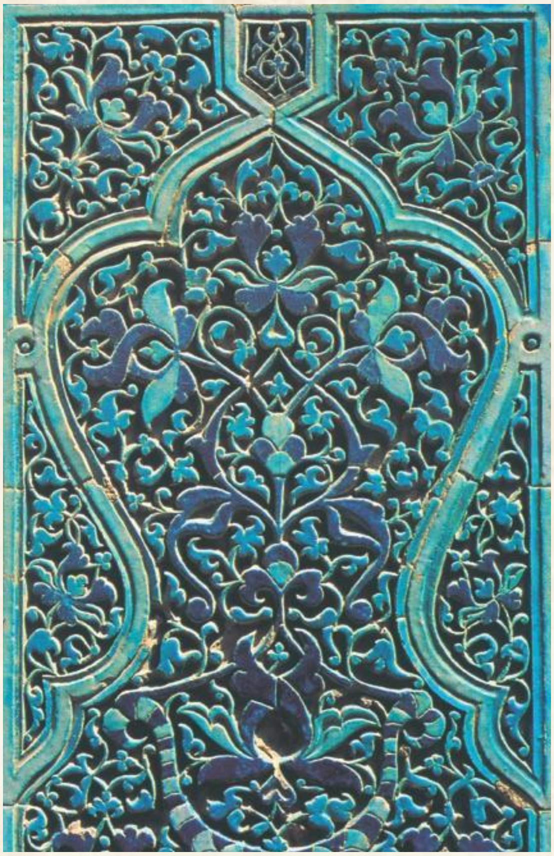
3 The Arabesque

In the broad sense of the term, the arabesque includes ornamentation in stylized plant forms and strictly geometrical interlacing work. The first kind of ornamentation is all rhythm, or, to put it more exactly, it is a practically perfect visual transcription of rhythm, whereas the second is crystalline in nature. Again then, in this domain, we discover the two poles of all artistic expression in Islam: the sense of rhythm and the spirit of geometry.

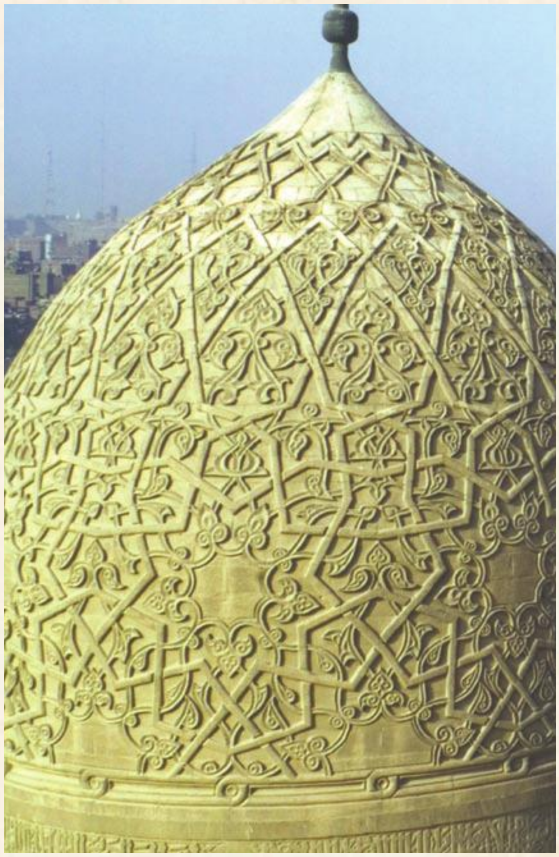
Historically, the arabesque in plant forms seems to be derived from the image of the vine, whose interlacing leaf-scrolls and branches winding back on themselves lend themselves quite naturally to stylization in undulating and spiraloid forms. We have found the vine in the décor of several of the most ancient monuments of Islamic art, particularly at Mshattā, where the vine, peopled with all kinds of animate objects, recalls the theme of the "tree of life", as well as in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock; the *miḥrāb* of the Great Mosque of the Umayyads at Damascus is ornamented with a vine, and this motif is reproduced in the *miḥrāb* of the Great Mosque at Kairouan. It is clear, even so, that the arabesque combines very varied plant forms. The vine is found together with the acanthus and the palm; instead of grapes, it occasionally bears pomegranates, pine-cones, or flowers. It cares nothing for botanical categories, and it could well be that its genesis is quite different from that suggested to us by examples of "official" art. Its "abstract" style, made up from a series of spiraloid and alternating curves, is certainly far more ancient than its relatively naturalistic form. Abstract ornamentation of this kind exists among the "barbarian" or nomad peoples who, coming from Central Asia, invaded Europe at the beginning of the Middle Ages. What is termed the "zoomorphic art" (Tierstil) of the Scythians and Sarmatians, which survived in "barbarian" art before the Middle Ages, is



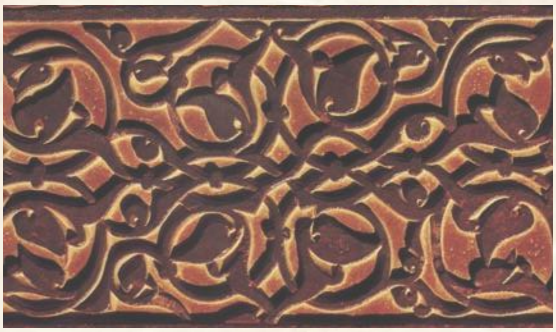
58. Stucco medallion adorning the southern *īwān* vault of the Māristān al-Qaymarī, Damascus, Syria



59. Ceramic panel from the Mausoleum of Shād-i-Mulk Aqa, Shāh-i-Zindah, the famous ensemble of cemeteries in Samarqand, Uzbekistan, 14th century



60. Carved stone dome of the Mausoleum of Qāytbāy, Cairo, Egypt, 1472. The ornament, made up of geometrical interlacing and floral arabesques, covers the cupola like a net



61. Detail of arabesque in the Palace of Raja Birbal at Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, India



62. Detail of tilework on the tomb of Emir Zadeh, Shāh-i-Zindah, Samarqand, Uzbekistan, 1386

entirely modeled on such forms as the double spiral or the double vortex—the *yin-yang* of the Chinese—whose universal symbolism is hardly obscured by the zoomorphic theme. It is always a case of cosmic rhythms with alternate and complementary phases of evolution and involution, expansion and contraction. Groups of facing animals—pairs, or wild beasts with their prey—are, in any case, no more than a variation on this basic theme.

A continuous series of spirals twining and untwining like waves on the sea may be translated in "barbarian" art into a line of animals in pursuit; it can just as well give rise to a



Figure 19: Example of Scythian zoomorphic art



63. Animal interlacing from the Book of Durrow, fol. 192v



Figure 20: Detail from an ornamental page of the Lindisfarne Gospels

plantlike composition, and it is here that we are brought back to the history of the arabesque. It is strange that, in achieving perfection in a decorative sense, the arabesque in plant forms should come closest to its purely linear and rhythmical prototype, whereas its first manifestations in the Umayyad period are still enfeoffed to Hellenic naturalism. But this reduction of an ornamental motif to its essential forms corresponds to a power inherent in all Islamic art.

The ornamental art of Islam was always able to draw upon popular art, whose products, executed in very perishable materials, have not often survived. So it is hard to say how and when popular art nourished fine art. Nevertheless, one observes the sudden appearance in architectural decoration of archaic forms and techniques. Thus it was that in the art of Sāmarrā, the city founded by the Abbasid caliphs on the bank of the Tigris, the relatively naturalistic vine motif quite suddenly gave place to abstract spiraloid forms, and it is certainly no mistake to see there the influence of the Turcoman pretorian guards who had become powerful at the Abbasid court.

There is a curious parallel between the flowering of an art with geometrical motifs like interlacement, double spirals, triple vortices, continuous swastikas, and so on in Northern Europe, and particularly in the British Isles, and the almost simultaneous appearance of these same forms in the nascent art of Islam. These two manifestations of art differ in only one respect: in northern countries, it is the stylized animals that seem somehow to be the first element of the ornamentation; they are entwined in spirals, fold into knots, and form interlacements of facing pairs, whereas it is the stylized plant, in Islamic surroundings, from which most of the ornamental motifs are fashioned. The analogies are occasionally striking, as, for example, between one page of the Lindisfarne Gospel (698 A.D.) and a certain mosaic pavement in the Umayyad palace of Minya on Lake Tiberias (705 A.D.), but it would be pointless to attempt to explain everything by exchanges

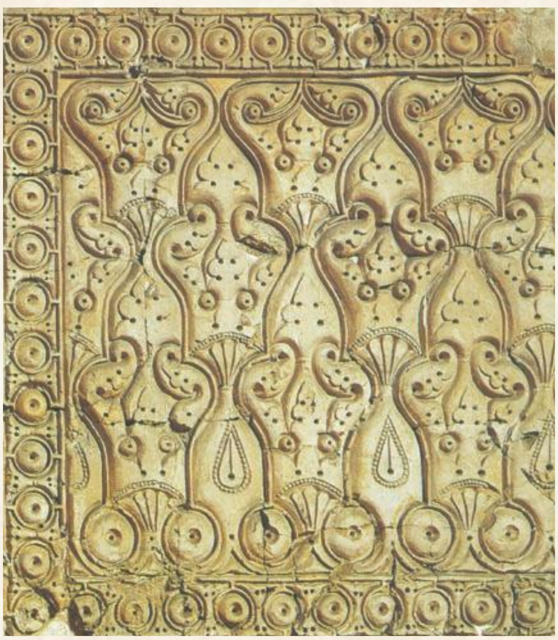


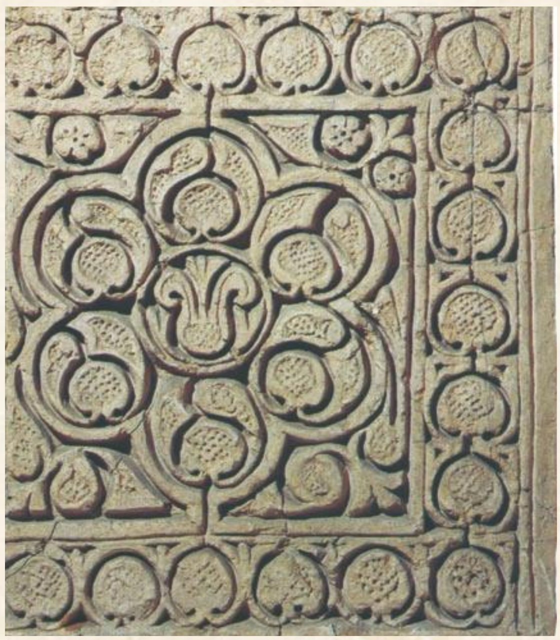


Figures 21-22: Examples of Scythian zoomorphic art

that might have taken place on the periphery of a Europe overwhelmed by barbarian invasions, between the Northern Isles and the Near East. The parallel in question is all part of a much vaster phenomenon, namely the emergence at the confines of the Greco-Roman world of an archaic art whose elements, abstract rather than descriptive, are linked to a universal and primordial symbolism. These elements lose their immediately symbolic character on contact with the "civilized" world or, more exactly, this character is suddenly obscured by the flowering of ornamental possibilities inherent in them. This metamorphosis is directly perceptible in the Christian art of Ireland, where it is calligraphy that lays hold of, and transforms most naturally, the ancient heritage of forms; but here, again, there is an analogy and a kind of anticipation of what was to come about in Muslim art.

Christian art in abstract forms was of only brief duration; its extraordinary genius crumbled as the northern islands gradually became reintegrated into the Latin world. The art of Islam, on the other hand, worked out a synthesis between the broad current of archaic forms, which flourish in popular art and that of the nomads, and the more rational requirements of urban art; it assimilates archaic motifs by reduc-





64-65. Stucco decorations from Sāmarrā, Iraq



66. Detail from a glazed tile panel in the Tash Havli Palace, Khīva, Uzbekistan, 1831-1841



67. Wall-tile from the Yeşil Cami (Green Mosque), Bursa, Turkey, 1420

ing them to their most abstract and general formulae. In a certain way, therefore, it levels them out and, in so doing, takes away every magical quality; but, in compensation, it endows them with a new lucidity, almost, one could say, with spiritual elegance. Let us not forget that Islam is the religion of return to the beginning, and that this return shows itself as a restoration of all things to unity.

In its more stylized versions, an arabesque in plant forms bears no more than a distant likeness to a plant. But it does represent a perfect transcription of the laws of rhythm into visual terms. Its unfolding is continuous, like a wave, with contrasting phases having various degrees of resonance. The design does not need to be symmetrical, but, to make up for this, it always has certain repetitions, whose rhythmic character is accentuated by the fact that the sounds and the silences are aesthetically equivalent.

Strictly speaking, rhythm belongs not to space but to time, of which it is not the quantitative measure but the qualitative one. It is by the mediation of movement that rhythm is re-established in the spatial dimension.

At the same time as being rhythm and melody, the arabesque implicitly retains its family relationship with the plant world, and its plant-like virtualities are ready to burst forth

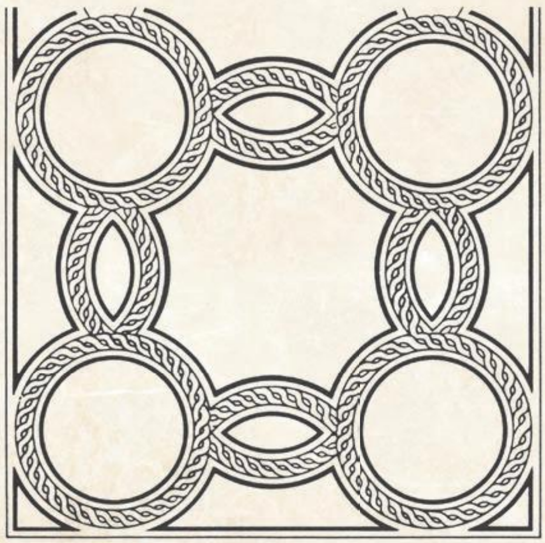
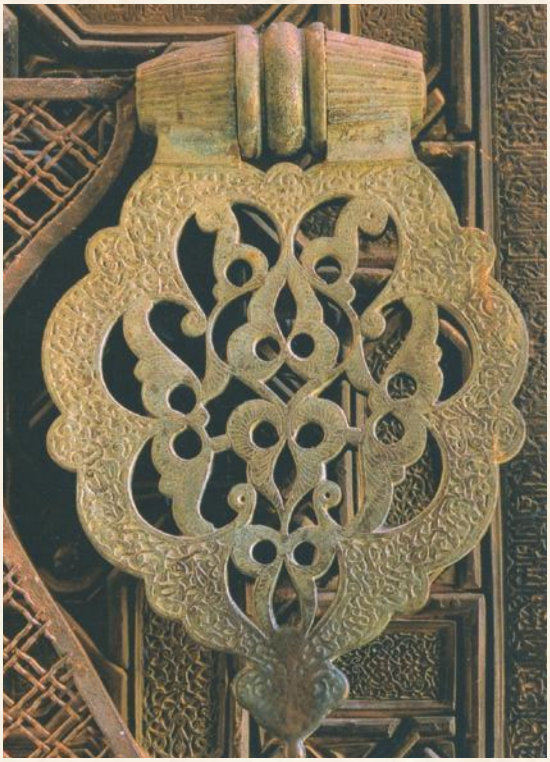


Figure 23: Interlacement from a Roman pavement

at any appropriate moment; the stylistic framework and the special genius of the artist or the ethnic group will serve to determine the extent to which the design can draw close to nature without losing its rhythmic continuity, or, again, move away from nature without impoverishment; for a certain richness is part of the idea of decoration and, in an arid land, nothing is more rich and precious than exuberant vegetation.



68. Door-knocker from the Puerta del Perdón, Sevilla, Spain, an example of pure arabesque with rhythmical alternation of solid and void forms, 12th century

The second mode, or element, of the arabesque is interlacement, perfect examples of which are already to be seen in Umayyad monuments, in the palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar and, above all, in the Great Mosque of Damascus, where they take the form of carved trellis-work protecting the windows. According to certain art historians, Arab interlacement is supposedly derived from Roman pavement mosaics, which were still being used in the Syria of the Umayyads. In fact, however, it is Roman interlacement that is a naturalistic and urban imitation—or paraphrase—of a motif belonging essentially to the archaic arts, that is, to arts still linked to a language of symbolism. Here again, Islamic art has taken over a very ancient motif and developed it with a kind of mathematical genius. Arab

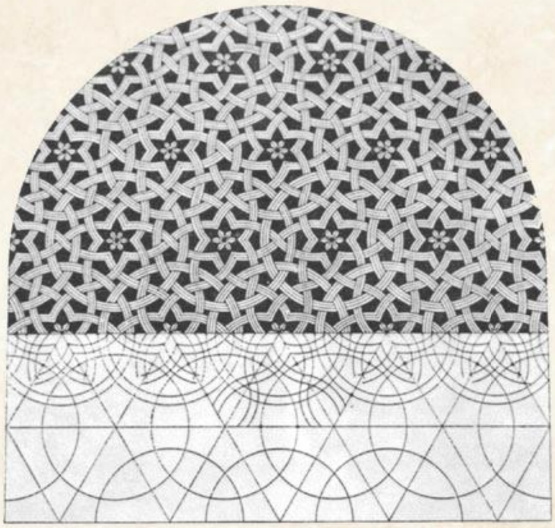
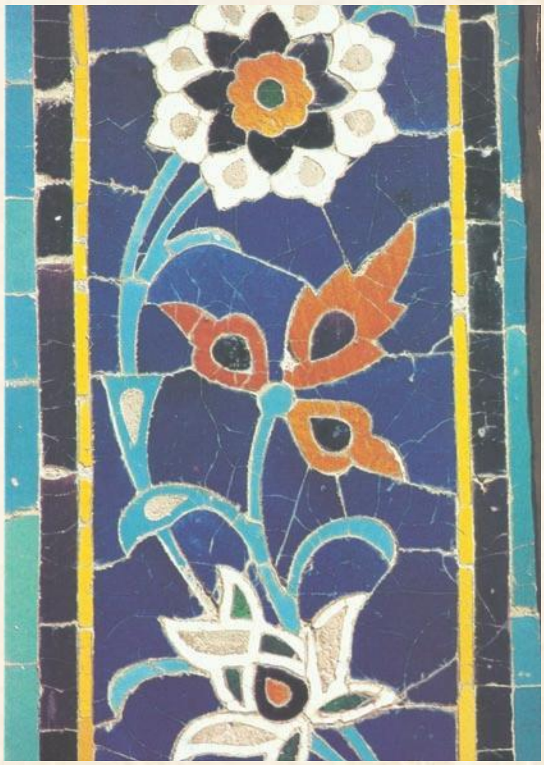


Figure 24: Window grille from Khirbat al-Mafjar and its geometrical scheme



69. Detail of cut tilework from the Mosque of Gawhar Shād, Mashhad, Persia, 15th century. Floral arabesque

interlacement has a geometrical complexity and rhythmic quality quite lacking in its Roman counterpart. This latter amounts to the representation of a knotted rope, and it is this rope which holds the interest; in Arab interlacement, on the other hand, the filled spaces and the empty areas, the design and its ground, are both of strictly equivalent value and balance each other out, in the same way that the lines always flow back on themselves, so that one's attention never halts on a particular element of the décor. The continuity of the interlacement invites the eye to follow it, and vision is then transformed into rhythmic experience accompanied by the intellectual satisfaction given by the geometric regularity of the whole.

The shapes of Islamic interlacement are normally built up from one or several regular figures inscribed in a circle which are then developed according to the principle of the star-shaped polygon, which means that the proportions inhering in the basic figure are re-echoed at each level of development. Different designs of an analogous nature may interpenetrate and form a continuous network of lines which radiate simultaneously from one and several centers.

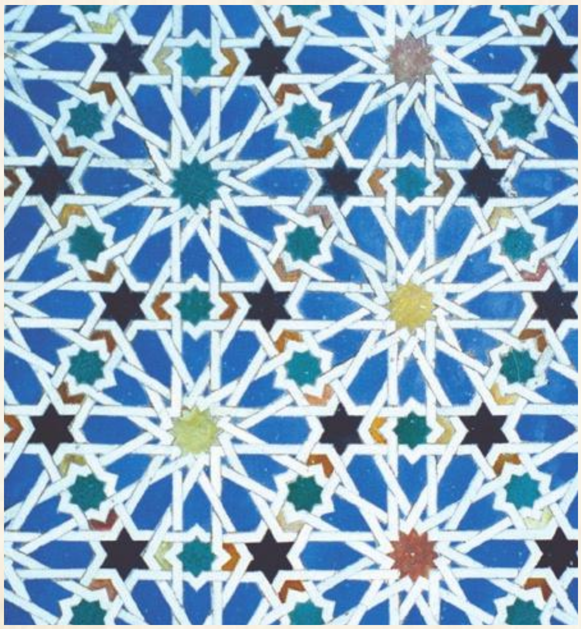
The favorite patterns are those based on dividing a circle by six, eight, and five. The six-fold division is the most "organic" because it comes about naturally from the radius; subdivided into twelve, it corresponds to the zodiac. To divide the circle by eight makes for greater amplitude, because it somehow embraces the extreme contrast of the squared circle. Geometrical development out of an octagon, or more exactly out of two squares inscribed in a circle, is the most habitual in Islamic art; we have already encountered it in the plan of the Dome of the Rock. It is found likewise in the construction of a cupola upon a square base, mediated by an octagon. A series of octagons inscribed one upon another ensures a particularly harmonious progression of proportions.

It is recognized that the five-fold or ten-fold division of the circle corresponds to the Golden Rule; it engenders the proportion $\frac{A}{B} = \frac{B}{A-B}$; and this is the most perfect integration of a part into the whole.

Particularly well-conceived interlacements combine star-shaped polygons of various types, for example of twelve and eight radii respectively.



70. Tile decoration from the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain. Pattern based on octagon



71. Tile decoration from the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain. Pattern based on hexagon



72. Detail of tilework from the main entrance to the Friday Mosque in Yazd, Persia, mid 14th century

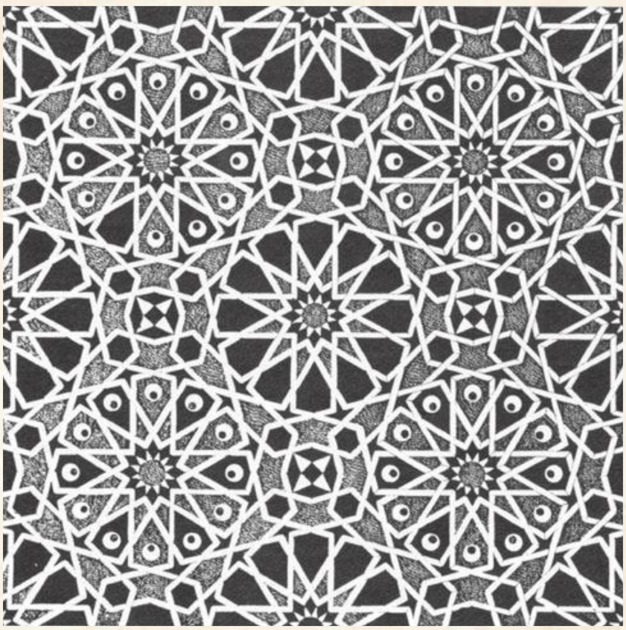


Figure 25: Pattern developed from a twelve-fold division of the circle

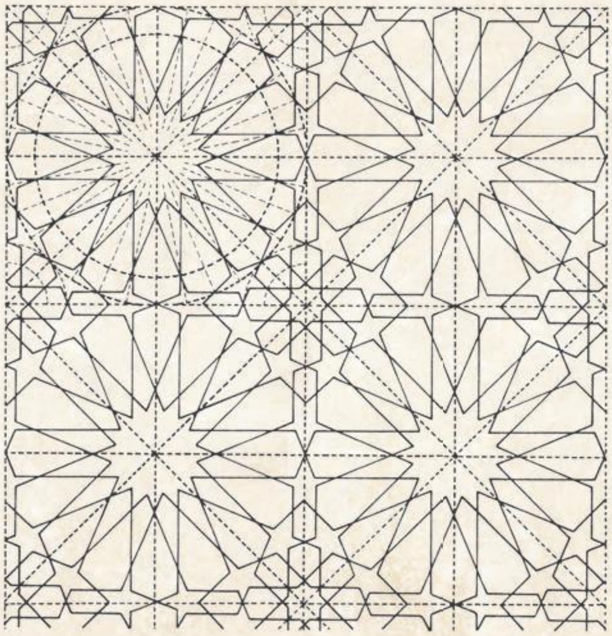
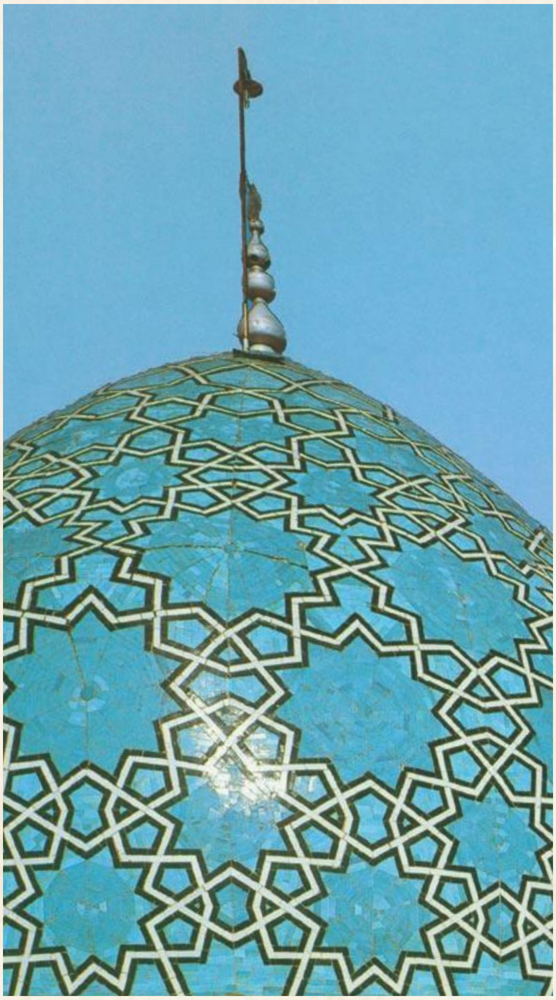


Figure 26: Pattern developed from an eight-fold division of the circle



73. Tilework on the dome of the Shāh Niʿmatullāh tomb in Mahan, Persia, 15th century (Safavid reconstruction)

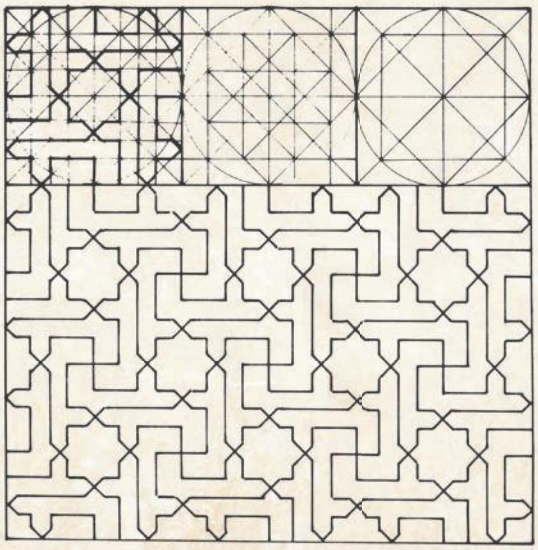
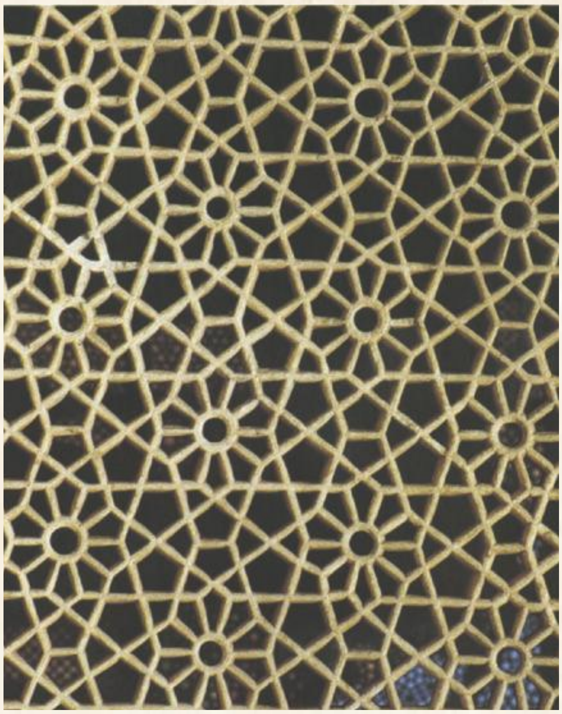


Figure 27: Pattern developed from an eight-fold division of the circle



74. Pierced marble screen from the tomb of Salīm Chishti at Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, India, late 16th century

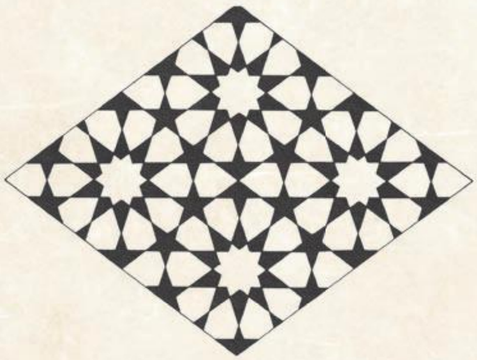
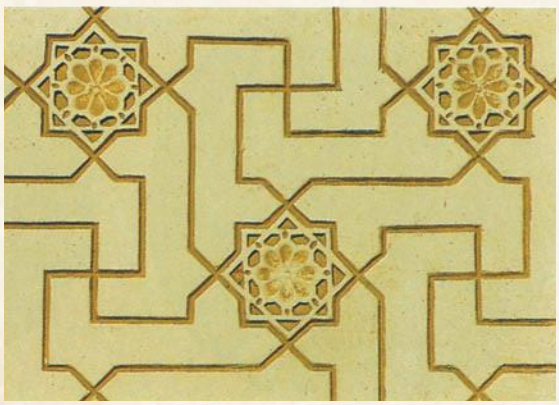
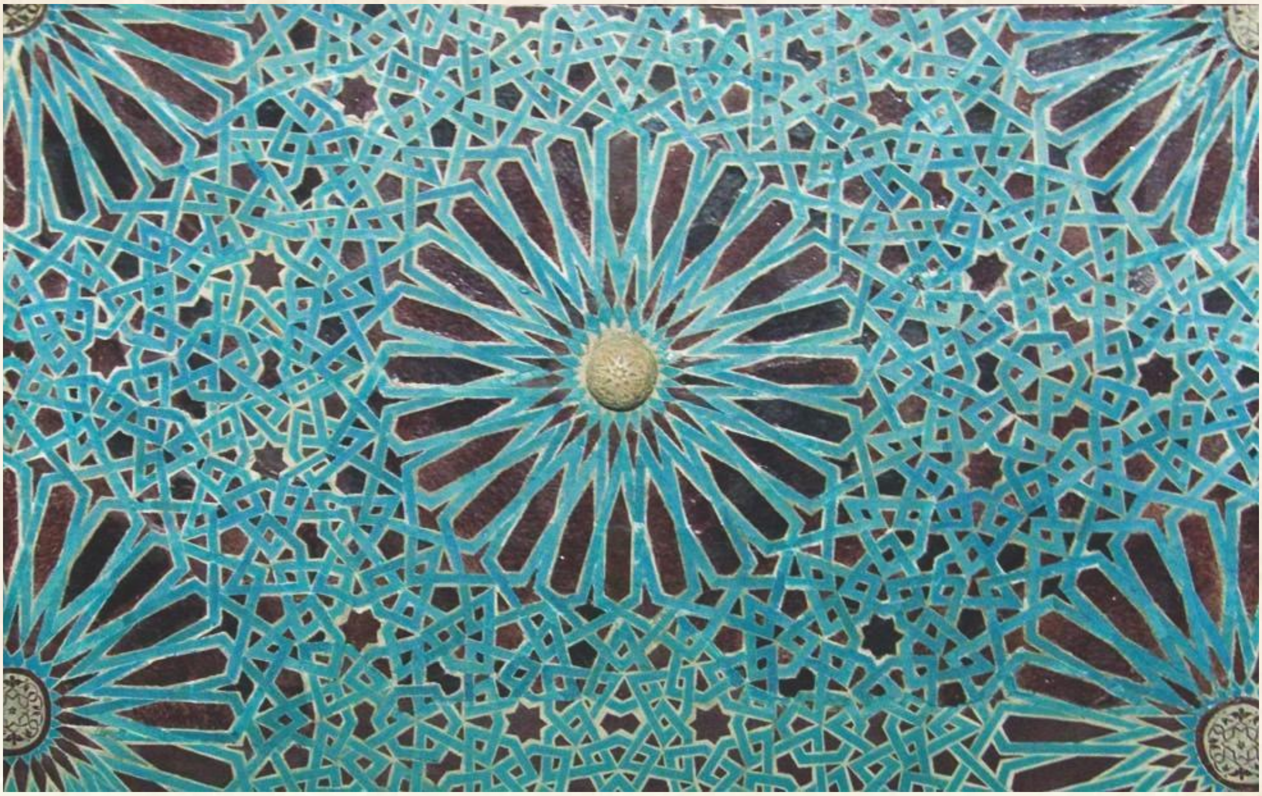


Figure 28: Pattern developed from a five- and ten-fold division of the circle



75. Detail of decoration in the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain



76. Detail of tilework in the *miḥrāb* of Eşrefoğlu Mosque, Beyşehir, Turkey, 13th century



77. Detail of the ceramic covering the principal façade of the Mausoleum of Zangī Ata in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, late 14th century



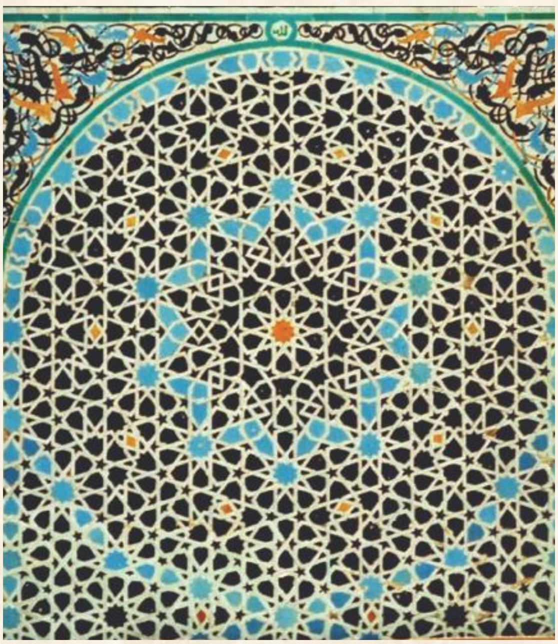
78. Detail of a grille with a pattern of stars and hexagons from the Mosque of the Old Fort, Delhi, India, 1541



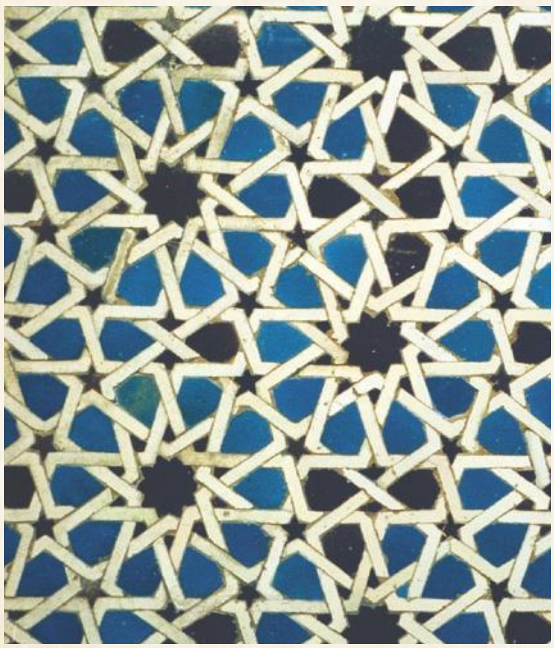
79. Ceramic panel from the Great Mosque of Yazd, Persia, 14th century. Pattern based on a twelve-fold division of the circle



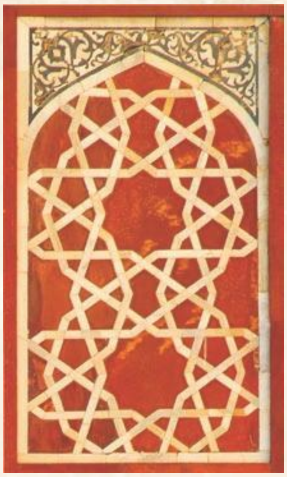
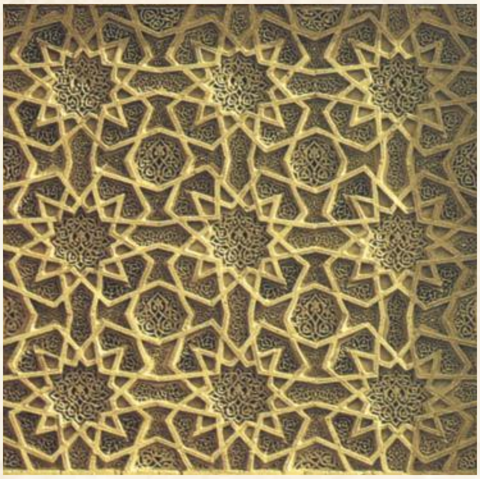
80. Tile decoration from the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain. Pattern based on octagon



81. Tile decoration from Fez, Morocco. Pattern developed from a five- and ten-fold division of the circle



82. Tile decoration from Sevilla, Spain. Pattern developed from a five- and ten-fold division of the circle

Left: **83**. Wall panel from Akbar's tomb, Agra, India; *Center*: **84**. Brickwork on the façade of the Mustanṣiriyyah Madrasah, Baghdad, Iraq. Pattern based on a twelve-fold division of the circle; *Right*: **85**. Window grille with hexagonal hollowed-out ceramic tiles from the Mausoleum of Shams-i Tabrīzi in Mulṭān, Pakistan

The Muslim artist or craftsman who draws a geometric ornament—and this may be a veritable web of interlacing rosettes and cover a surface of varying size—does not, as a rule, retain the circle which has guided the design and within which the basic pattern has been traced out; this circle is implicit, and felt instead of being seen, and this simply brings out the radiation of the rectilinear design more strongly: thus it belongs to the world of crystal, snow-flakes, and the serene and distant shining of the stars.

For a Muslim artist or—what comes to the same thing—a craftsman who has to decorate a surface, geometrical interlacement doubtless represents the most intellectually satisfying form, for it is an extremely direct expression of the idea of the Divine Unity underlying the inexhaustible variety of the world. True, Divine Unity as such is beyond all representation, because its nature, which is total, lets nothing remain outside itself; it is "without a second". Nevertheless, it is through harmony that it is reflected in the world, harmony being nothing other than "unity in multiplicity" (*al-waḥdah fi ʾl-kathrah*), the same as "multiplicity in unity" (*al-kathrah fi ʾl-waḥdah*). Interlacement expresses the one aspect and the other. But it is in yet another respect that it recalls the unity underlying things, namely that it is generally constituted from a single element, a single rope or a single line, which comes endlessly back upon itself.

4 The Sphere and the Cube

The synthesis of geometry and rhythm is likewise found, in a form which is not simply linear but fully spatial, in a very typical element of Islamic architecture, namely, the *muqarnas* which are described by the very approximate term of "stalactites". Briefly, it is a case of having cupola supports in the form of niches, repeated one after the other in the same way as the cells of a honeycomb are repeated or as crystals cluster together according to the radiation of their axes. This element permits the clear articulation of any passage between plane and curved surfaces and, in particular, the transition between a cupola and its rectangular base. For this same purpose, Roman art employed the pendentive, which provides a continuous and, as it were, gliding transition between the hemisphere of

the cupola and the right angle of the base. From the geometrical point of view, the cupola and the pendentive belong to two spheres of different sizes, and the transition from one to the other implies a change of profile which the eye hardly perceives. This did not at all satisfy the need for geometrical clarity and rhythmic articulation that animated Muslim architects. As for construction with corner squinches in the form of sea-shells or niches, that was no more satisfactory than the other, because it did not ensure all-round continuity between the rectangular base and the cupola. Instead of a single niche mounted saddlewise in the corner walls and supporting by its vault the side of an octagon, which supported in its turn the circular base of the cupola, a number of honeycomb niches were brought together in such a way as to create a gradual transition between the corner and the dome's circular base. Vertically, the niches mount one upon the other; horizontally they are joined together by their arrises which become variously accentuated; when these arrises are extended into space, they look rather like stalactites.

The *muqarnas* have a both static and rhythmical character, as is brought out most clearly by transposing the relationship of dome to base, or

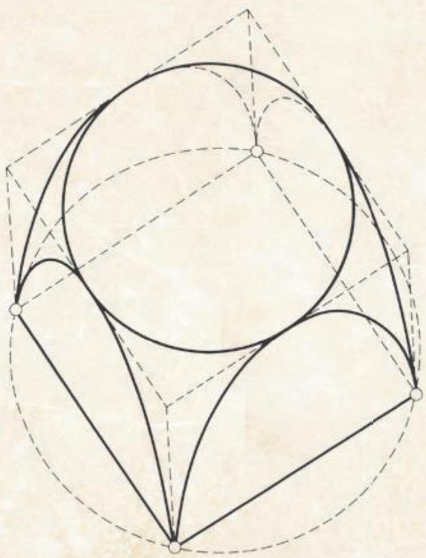


Figure 29: Roman pendentive, a geometrical analysis

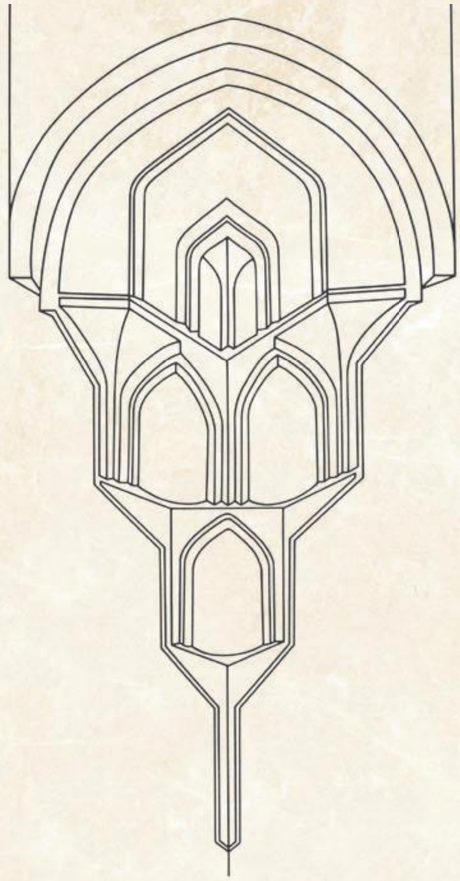


Figure 30: *Muqarnas* as squinch of a cupola

sphere to cube, back to its cosmic model, which is none other than that of heaven to earth, when heaven is characterized by its indefinite circular movement and earth by its polarization into such four-sided contrasts as hot and cold, humid and dry. The honeycomb of *muqarnas* linking the cupola to its quadrangular base is therefore an echo of the motion of heaven in the terrestrial order. But the immobility of the cube element may equally have the sense of completion, or the fixed and timeless state of the world, and this sense is more befitting to the architecture of a sanctuary. In this case, the honeycomb of the *muqarnas* expresses a coagulation of cosmic motion, its crystallization in the pure present.

In practice, *muqarnas* consist of items which are carved or molded according to a certain number of models and which can be variously

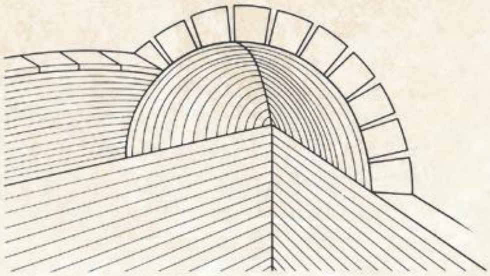


Figure 31: Sasanid corner squinch

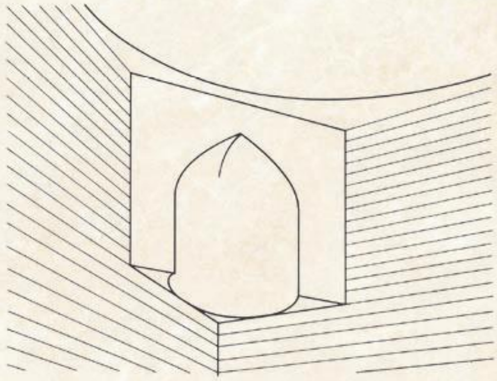


Figure 32: Corner squinch in the form of a niche



Figure 33: *Muqarnas* forming a transition from square to octagon

assembled. The ways in which they are deployed vary according to the profile of their arches and the degree of concavity of their vaults; they may even espouse rectilinear forms, or concave ones made convex.

The historical origin of this element is uncertain. It is very probably a creation of architecture in baked brick, as developed in Iran and Iraq. The oldest example found so far is at

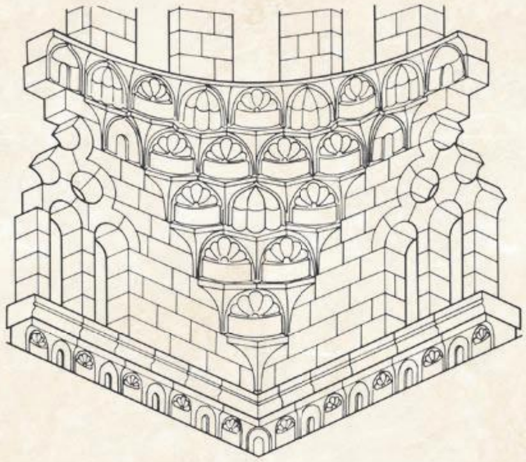


Figure 34: *Muqarnas* forming a transition from square to circle

Raqqa in Syria and dates from the end of the eighth century. By the twelfth century it had spread throughout the Muslim world. Vaults composed entirely in these "stalactites" saw the light of day simultaneously in the Maghrib and the countries of the East. In the West, they are generally constructed in plaster and attain an almost diaphanous delicacy; occasionally they are in wood, like the magnificently painted ceiling of the Capella Palatina in Sicily, then half-Arab. It is in Asia Minor and Mamluk Egypt that are found the most beautiful *muqarnas* carved in stone; the Turkish peoples, first the Seljuks and then the Ottomans, were able to give this element its greatest plastic vigor.

The European observer may well be surprised to find that this architectural element was able to conquer the entire Muslim world, from Arab Spain to Afghanistan and India. The reason for its success undoubtedly lies in the fact that it permits space to be articulated in a both geometrical and rhythmic manner; its conception must be ascribed to a perspective that unites space and time.

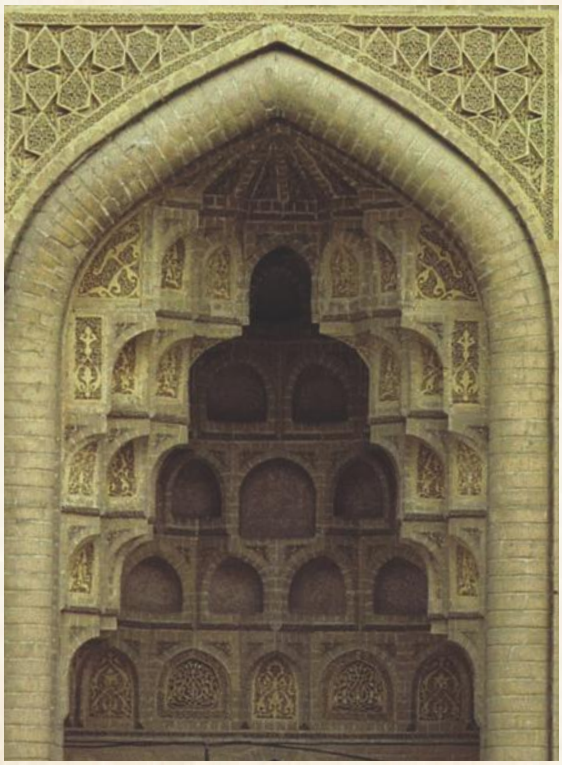
Islamic architecture also knew the rib-cupola or rib-vault, analogous to the Gothic vault, which was perhaps influenced by Islamic models. It is particularly in Persian brick architecture that this method of construction was developed to perfection and with certain special techniques which distinguish it sharp-


86. *Muqarnas* at the Sibāʿiyya Madrasah, Damascus, Syria, 16th century


87. *Muqarnas* at the Mausoleum of al-Gulshānī, Cairo, Egypt, 15th century

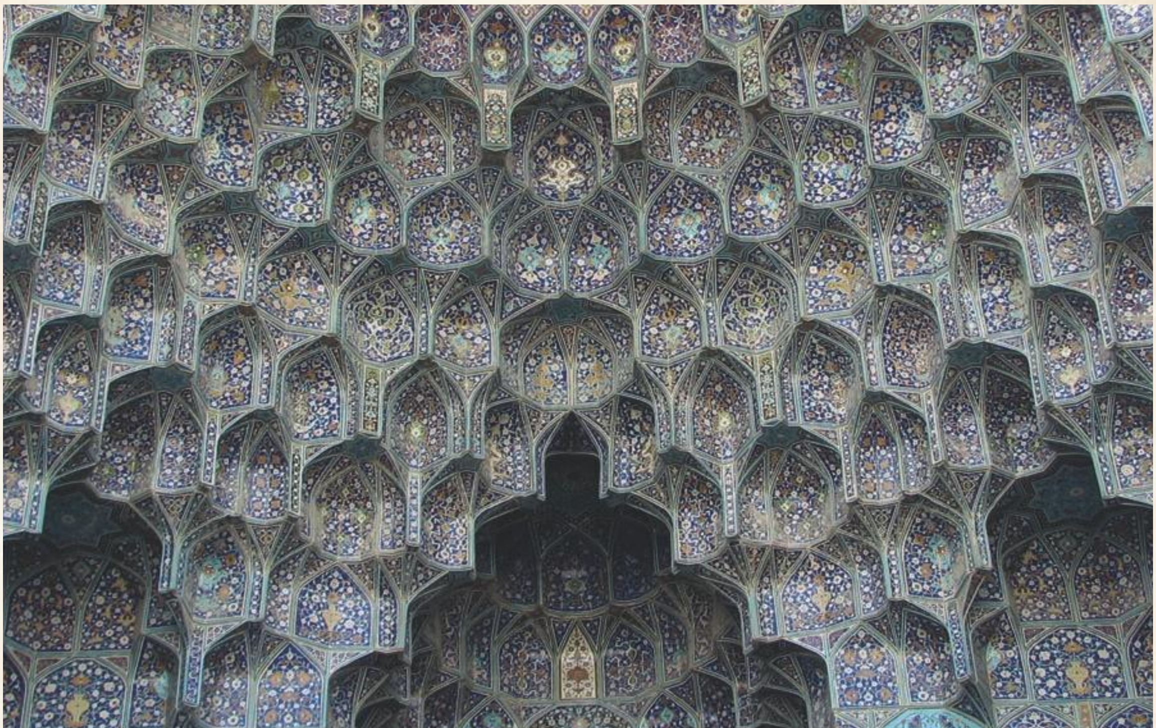
ly from its counterpoint in Christian art. The ribs of a Persian vault do not support it like a timber framework, but they strengthen it and, as it were, stretch it out by means of brick arrises which are apparent only at the extrados; at the intrados, the ribs are barely perceptible, so that the different segments of the vault are presented as facets of a single concave surface. At the same time, the ribs do not all come together in the crown of the vault; they are interlaced like basket-work, leaving the central crown of the vault or cupola free. All this reveals an entirely different concept from that inhering in the Gothic vault; the latter somehow comes


88. *Muqarnas* at Eşrefoğlu Mosque, Beyşehir, Turkey, 13th century


89. *Muqarnas* with terracotta panels, Abbasid Palace, Baghdad, Iraq, c. 1230



90. *Muqarnas* above the main entrance of al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, Egypt



91. *Muqarnas* at the entrance of the Shāh Mosque in Iṣfahān, Persia

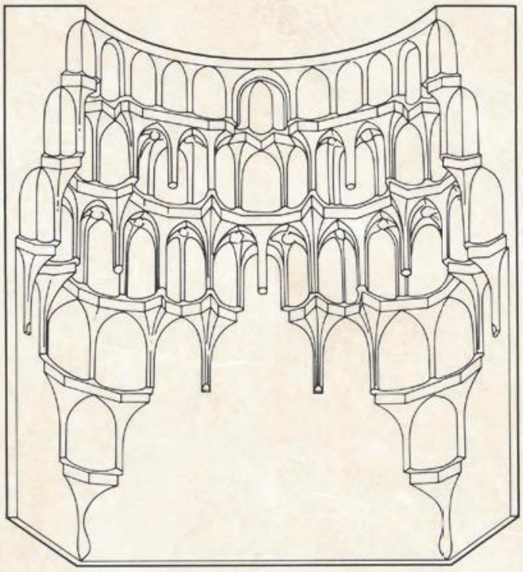
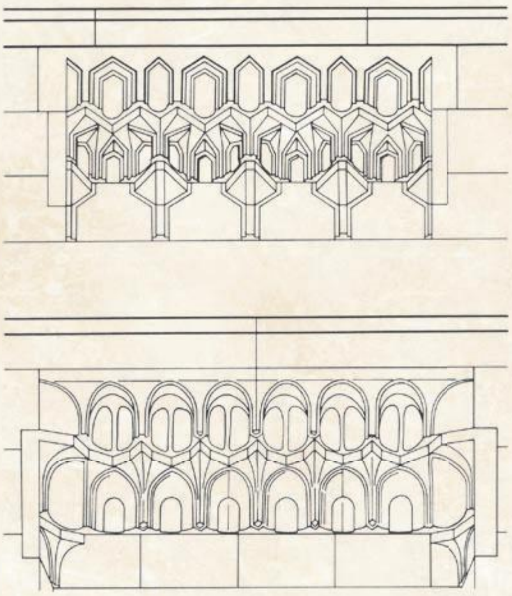


Figure 35: *Muqarnas* forming "stalactites"



Figures 36-37: Rectilinear and curvilinear *muqarnas*

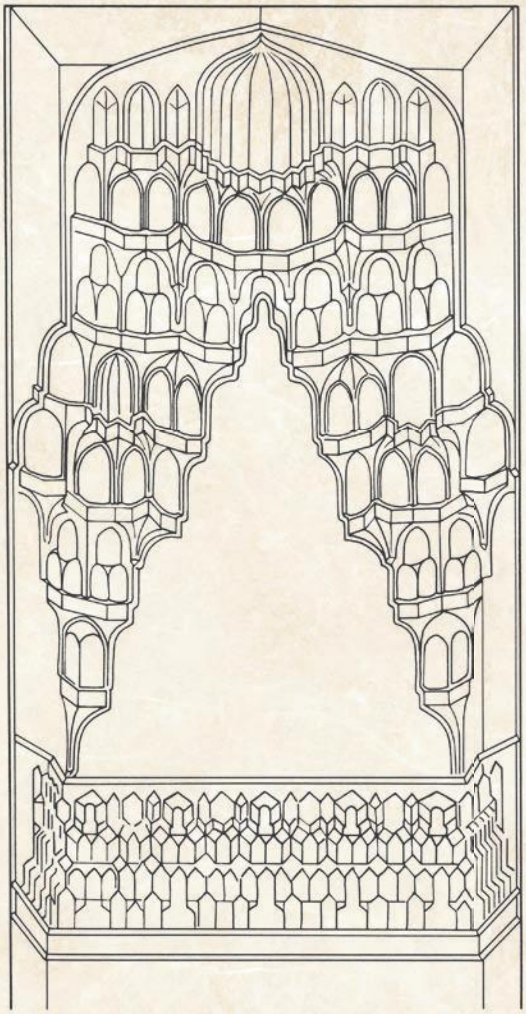
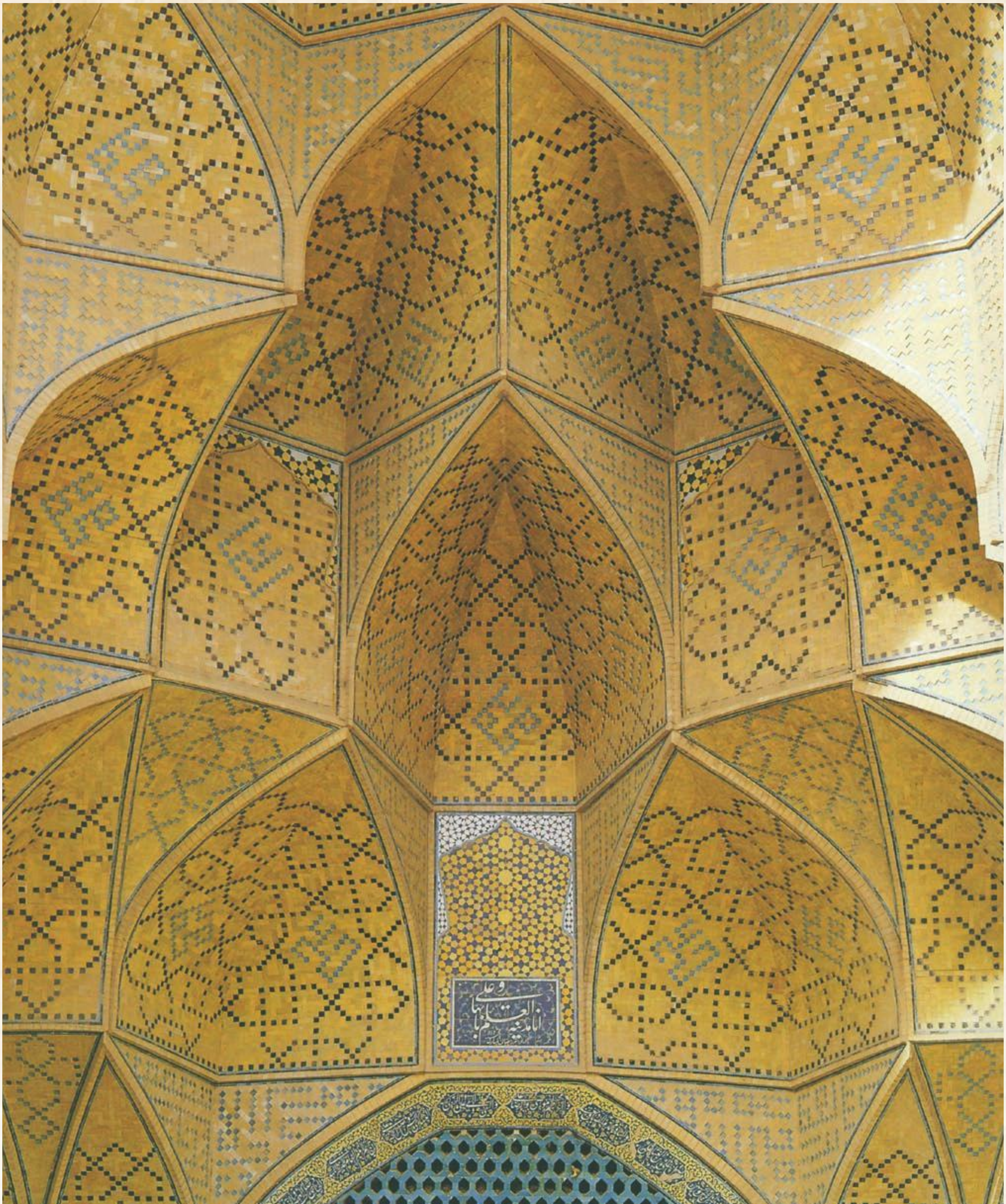


Figure 38: *Muqarnas*: niche

about as the convergence of forces which ascend by the columns and are then taken up by the ribwork as far as their point of junction in the vault-crown, whereas the Persian or—in more general terms—the Islamic vault unfolds from the top downwards, leaving its spherical unity, which becomes differentiated towards its periphery, to be gradually transformed by ever more articulated facets into the polygonal form of the substructure.

This difference between the Persian and the Gothic rib-vault is, moreover, only one example of a far more general difference. In Muslim art, unity is never the result of synthesis of component elements; it exists *a priori*, and all the particular forms are deduced from it; the total form of a building or an interior exists before its parts, whether they have a static function or not. Since there is nothing fortuitous in the formal language of a sacred art, and since architecture in particular is like a geometrical formulation of the truths inherent in the religion from which it derives, it is permissible



92. *Muqarnas* in the south-west *īwān* of the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) in Iṣfahān, Persia

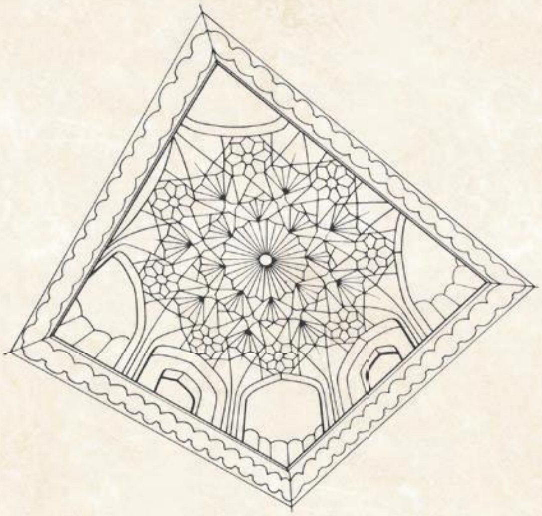


Figure 39: Persian vault

to ascribe the differences between them—and this difference is spelled out with outstanding clarity in the divergence of the Persian and the Gothic vaults—to the spiritual possibilities of the respective religions. The central theme of Christianity is union with God, which is seen as an end towards which every human effort must aspire; the central theme of Islam, on the other hand, is Unity as such, which exists *a priori*, everywhere and at all times, and which simply needs to be recognized, so that man's effort in this regard serves only to extricate the Unity already existing in himself and in all things. Granted that neither of these perspectives precludes the other and that they are even essentially one, nevertheless there is a difference of emphasis, which is decisive for the "styles" of these two traditional worlds.

Having arrived at this point in our discussion, we should like to insert a few considerations of a principial order, drawn from what we would happily term the "Platonic dimension" of Islam.

Form is both quality and limitation; it is limited, and limiting, to the extent that it is peripheral and accidental, and qualitative to the extent that it carries its principle within itself.

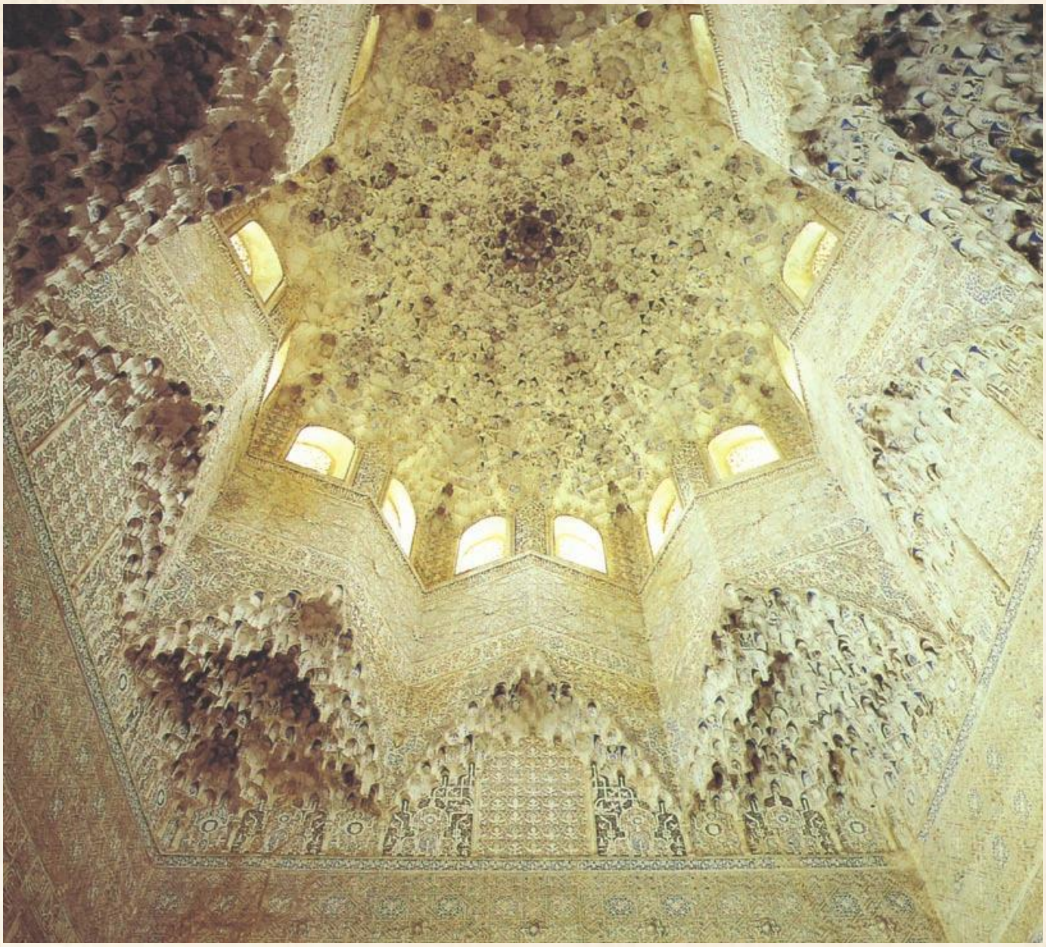
This is true of the sphere or the circle and the forms derived most directly from them, such as regular polyhedrons or polygons.

In a certain sense the sphere represents, in the geometrical order, the threshold between form and its formless principle, indicated by the point without extension. The sphere—or the circle, if one is dealing simply in planes—come about as the result of the radiation of the point which is the principle, whereas regular forms flow from the sphere—or circle—by qualitative differentiation, and irregular or accidental forms by quantitative fragmentation. Transposed into the universal order, the sphere corresponds to the Spirit (*ar-Rūḥ*) emanating from the ungraspable point of Being. Regular forms or images correspond to the archetypes or immutable essences (*al-aʿyān ath-thābitah*) contained in the Spirit, and accidental forms to ephemeral beings.

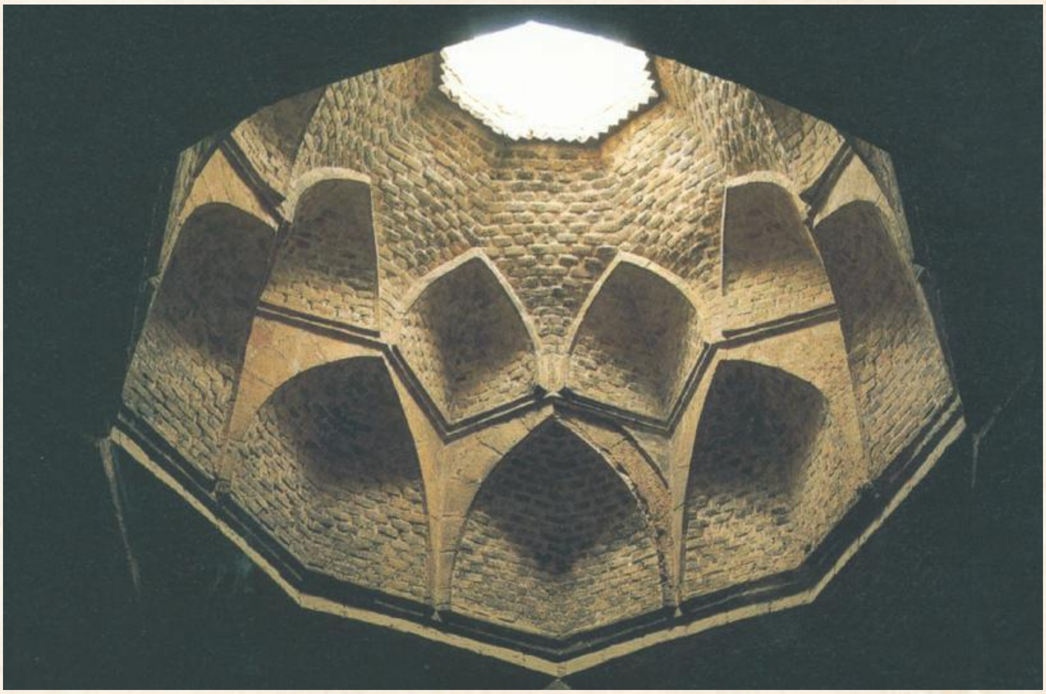
5 The Alchemy of Light

The artist who wishes to express the idea of the "unity of existence" or the "unity of the real" (*waḥdat al-wujūd*),[10] has actually three means at his disposal: geometry, which translates unity into the spatial order, rhythm, which reveals it in the temporal order and also indirectly in space, and light which is to visible forms what Being is to limited existences. Light is, in fact, itself indivisible; its nature is not altered by its refraction into colors nor diminished by its gradation into clarity and darkness. And in the same way as nothingness does not itself exist except by its illusory opposition to Being, so also darkness is visible only by contrast with light, to the extent that light makes shadows appear.[11]

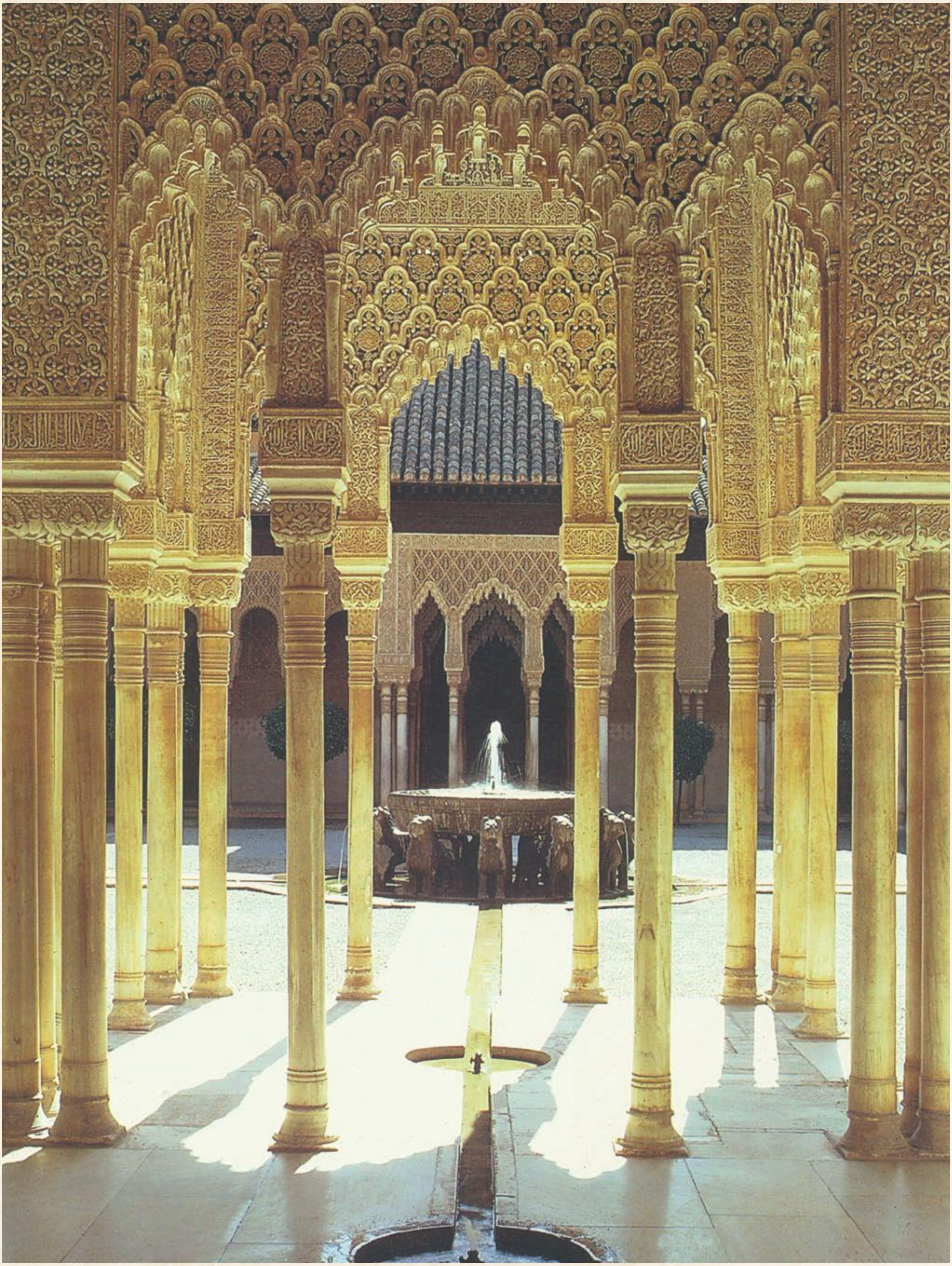
"God is the light of the heavens and the earth", says the Koran (24:35). It is the divine light which brings things out from the darkness of nothing. In the symbolical order in question, to be visible signifies to exist; now, just as shadow adds nothing to the light, things are real



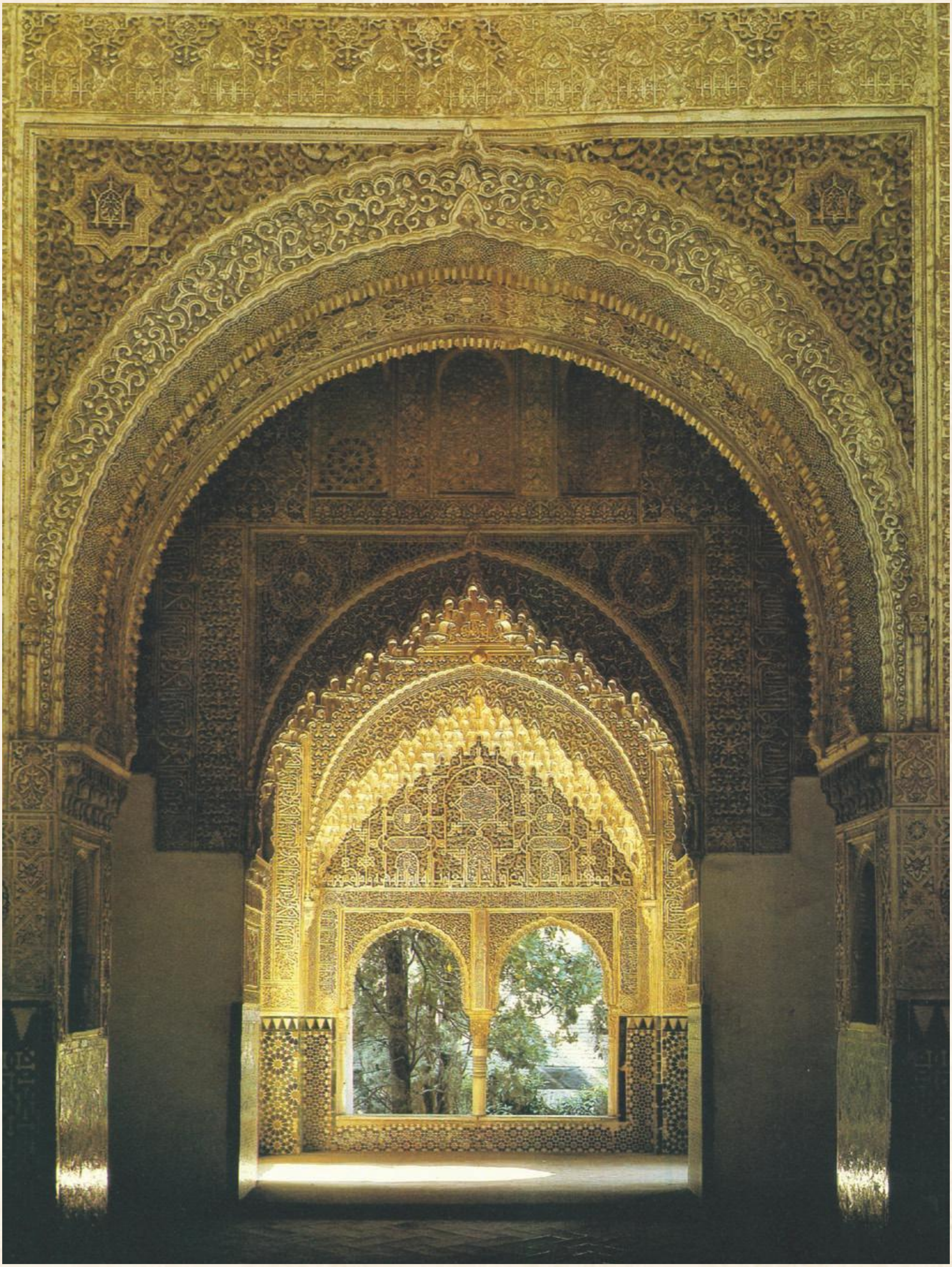
93. "Stalactites" in the ceiling of the Sala de los Abencerrajes in the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain



94. *Muqarnas* in the eastern *īwān* of the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) in Iṣfahān, Persia



95. Court of Lions in the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain



96. The Mirador of Lindaraja in the Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain

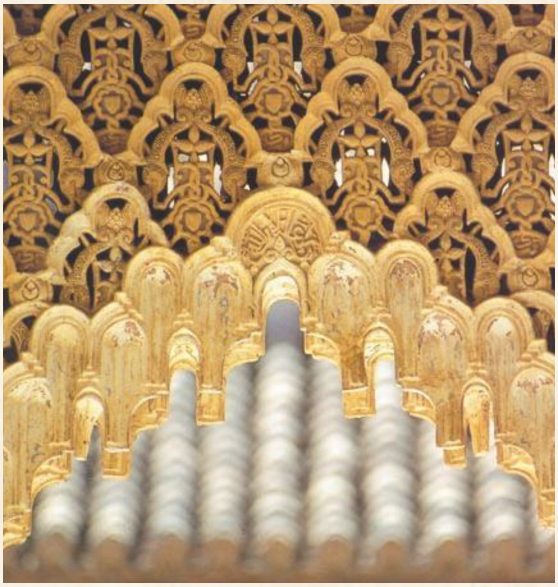
only to the extent that they share in the light of Being.

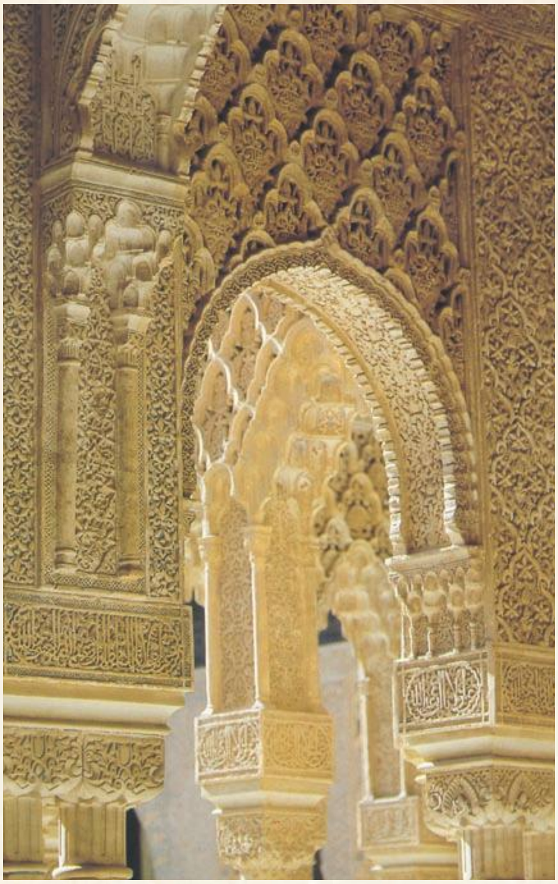
There is no more perfect symbol of the Divine Unity than light. For this reason, the Muslim artist seeks to transform the very stuff he is fashioning into a vibration of light. It is to this end that he covers the interior surfaces of a mosque or palace—and occasionally the outer ones—with mosaics in ceramic tiles. This lining is often confined to the lower part of the walls, as if to dispel their heaviness. It is for the same purpose that the artist transforms other surfaces into perforated reliefs to filter the light. *Muqarnas* also serve to trap light and diffuse it with the most subtle gradations.

Colors reveal the interior richness of light. Light viewed directly is blinding; it is through the harmony of colors that we divine its true nature, which bears every visual phenomenon within itself.

Among the examples of Islamic architecture under the sway of the sovereignty of light, the Alhambra at Granada occupies the first rank. The Court of Lions in particular sets the example of stone transformed into a vibration of light; the lambrequins of the arcades, the friezes in *muqarnas*, the delicacy of the columns which seem to defy gravity, the scintillation of the roofs in green tile-work, and even the water-jets of the fountain, all contribute to this impression.

We have compared this art to alchemy,[12] the well-known theme of which is the transmutation of lead into gold; lead is the base metallic substance, shapeless and opaque, whereas gold, the solar metal, is in some way light made corporeal. In the spiritual order, alchemy is none other than the art of transmuting bodily consciousness into spirit: "body must be made spirit", say the alchemists, "for spirit to become body". By analogy, one can say of Muslim architecture that it transforms stone into light which, in its turn, is transformed into crystals.





97-98. Details of stucco decoration in the Court of Lions, Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain

Notes to Chapter IV

1. The great Muslim scholar Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, born in 973 A.D. at Khīva, wrote on this subject: "Our religion and our empire are Arab … subject tribes have often joined together to give the state a non-Arab character. But they have not been able to achieve their aim, and as long as the call to prayer continues to echo in their ears five times a day, and the Koran in lucid Arabic is recited among the worshippers standing in rows behind the *imām*, and its refreshing message is preached in the mosques, they will needs submit, the bond of Islam will not be broken, nor its fortresses vanquished. Branches of knowledge from all countries in the world have been translated into the tongue of the Arabs, embellished and made seductive, and the beauties of languages have infused their veins and arteries, despite the fact that each people considers its own language beautiful, since it is accustomed to it and employs it in its daily offices. I speak from experience, for I was reared in a language in which it would be strange to see a branch of knowledge enshrined. Thence I passed to Arabic and Persian, and I am a guest in both languages, having made an effort to acquire them, but I would rather be reproved in Arabic than complimented in Persian."

2. Certain people will raise the objection that not all Arabs were nomads and that there were cities in Arabia like Mecca and Yathrib (Medina) before Islam. The answer is that in Central Arabia, where Islam had its birth, nomadism was broadly predominant; even the aristocracy of the Quraysh, formed of caravan merchants, is inconceivable without a nomadic background. It is true that Mecca already constituted a spiritual center and, therefore, a factor making for stability in the midst of tribal fluctuations. But Mecca is precisely the anchor which Islam used to transform the ethnic substance represented by the nomadic Arabs into a religious community.

3. See Edouard Dorme, "L'Arabe littéral et la langue de Hammourabi", in Louis Massignon, *Mélanges* (Damascus, 1957).

4. The most ancient Semitic alphabets have a total of twenty-nine sounds or letters, twenty-eight of which are retained by Arabic, the "missing" sound being a variant of "S". It is possible that the reduction of the alphabet to twenty-eight letters conveys a symbolic purpose, for certain Arab authors see a correspondence between these sounds and the twenty-eight stations of the moon. The phonetic cycle progressing from gutturals to palatals, dentals, and labials retraces the "lunary" phases of primordial sound emanating from the sun.

5. There do exist verbs composed of four or five root consonants, but in such cases, consonantal groups like *ts* or *br* play the role of single sounds.

6. According to the Koran (2:31-33), it was Adam who was able to "name" all beings, whereas the angels could not.

7. The phonetic symbolism which inheres in Arabic is revealed in particular by the permutation of radical consonants: for example, the root RḤM signifies "to be merciful", "to have pity on", whereas the root ḤRM has the sense of "to forbid", "to make inaccessible", *sacrum facere*; similarly, the root QBL has the sense of "to face", "to receive" (whence the Hebrew word *Qabbalah*), while the root QLB has the sense of "to return", "to reverse" (whence the term *qalb* meaning "matrix" and "heart"). A further example is the root FRQ, meaning "to separate", "to divide" (the Latin word *furca* seems to be derived from an analogous root), and its permutation RFQ which has the sense of "to accompany", "to join", whereas the group FQR means "to be poor, in want".

8. In the Umayyad mosque at Damascus, for example, or the palace of Khirbat al-Mafjar.

9. See Martin Lings, *The Quranic Art of Calligraphy and Illumination* (London: World of Islam Festival Publishing Co., 1976).

10. The term *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which belongs to Islamic esoterism and more particularly to the school of Ibn ʿArabī, can apply at various levels and so be translated in various ways: unity of existence, unity of being, unity of the Real, etc.

11. "Hast thou not looked to thy Lord, how He spread the shadow? Had He wished, He had made it without motion. Then We made the sun to show it. Then We withdrew it back to Us, an easy withdrawing. . ." (Koran 25:45-46).

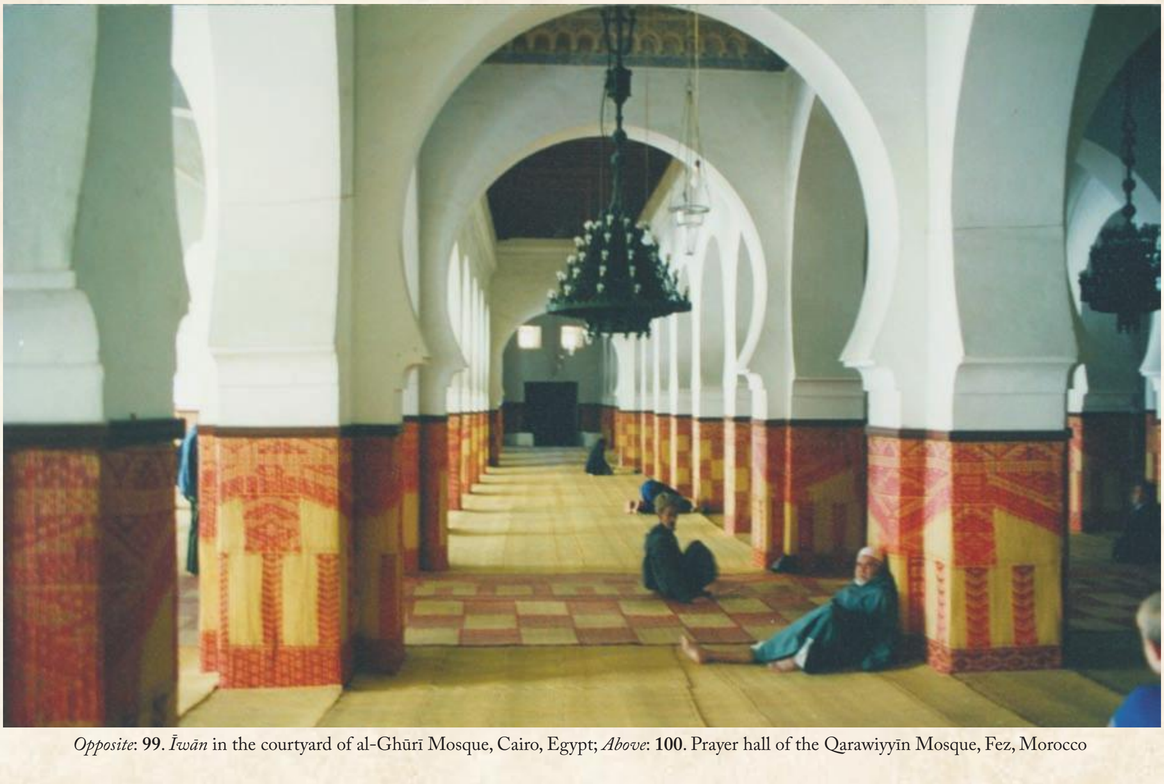
12. Titus Burckhardt, *Moorish Culture in Spain* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972).



Chapter V
Art and Liturgy

1 *The Nature and Role of Sacred Art*

In speaking of Islamic worship in relation to art, we used the term "liturgy", and this needs further definition because it evokes *a priori* the Christian pattern of worship, which developed gradually on the basis of an apostolic tradition and by the work of the Church Fathers. In this context, the liturgy is distinguished from the sacrament, the divinely instituted rite which, in a way, the liturgy enfolds, protecting it and at the same time manifesting it, while being itself protected and unfolded by sacred art which transposes its themes into architecture and iconography, to mention only the two most important visual arts in the milieu of Christianity. Things present themselves quite differently in Islam, where the forms of worship are fixed, down to the smallest detail, by the Koran and the Prophet's example. There is practically no liturgical borderline, so that one can say equally that the liturgy is comprised within the rite itself, that is, in the form of worship divinely instituted or, again, that sacred art assumes the role of the liturgy, and that this role consists in creating a framework to suit the rite, open to "angelic blessings" and closed to dark psychic influences. We shall see that such is indeed the role and position of art in Islam, and it immediately explains the importance assumed in this context by religious architecture and even by architecture in general—since every dwelling is in principle a place of worship—as well as by every other art that serves to shape the environment, such as decoration, epigraphy, and the art of carpets, not forgetting the liturgical role of clothing.



Opposite: **99**. *Īwān* in the courtyard of al-Ghūrī Mosque, Cairo, Egypt; *Above*: **100**. Prayer hall of the Qarawiyyīn Mosque, Fez, Morocco

Sacred art therefore fulfills two mutually complementary functions: it radiates the beauty of the rite and, at the same time, protects it. The first of these functions is legitimized in Islam by the fact that the Prophet advised his companions to chant the Koran, that is, to recite it in rhythmic and melodious fashion. Thus, the revealed word reverberates in the musical order, and this is assuredly the firmest possible link between rite and art.

The notion that worship should be accompanied by beauty and, as it were, enwrapped in it, is also confirmed by these passages from the Koran: "Oh sons of Adam! wear your comely garments in every place of prayer.…Who then has declared unlawful the comely garb that God has brought forth for His servants…?" (7:31-32). We shall return later to the liturgical role of clothing.

The complementary function of sacred art, that of protection, is illustrated by the traditional story (*ḥadīth*), in which the Prophet is said to have had a cloth or curtain, which was decorated with figured designs, removed from his room because, he said, these figures disturbed his prayers. Now the Prophet certainly did not lack the power of abstract concentration, but he wished thereby to show that certain forms of art are incompatible with Islamic worship. It must not be said that he was condemning art as such, as if the rejection of certain forms did not necessarily call forth others, for we live in a world woven out of forms and we cannot avoid choosing between them.

In a certain sense, a rite is a divine art. For those who baulk at this way of expressing things, let us make clear that we mean by this a manifestation, on the level of forms and according to a specifically human mode, of a reality which



101. The winter prayer hall of the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) in Iṣfahān, Persia, 1575

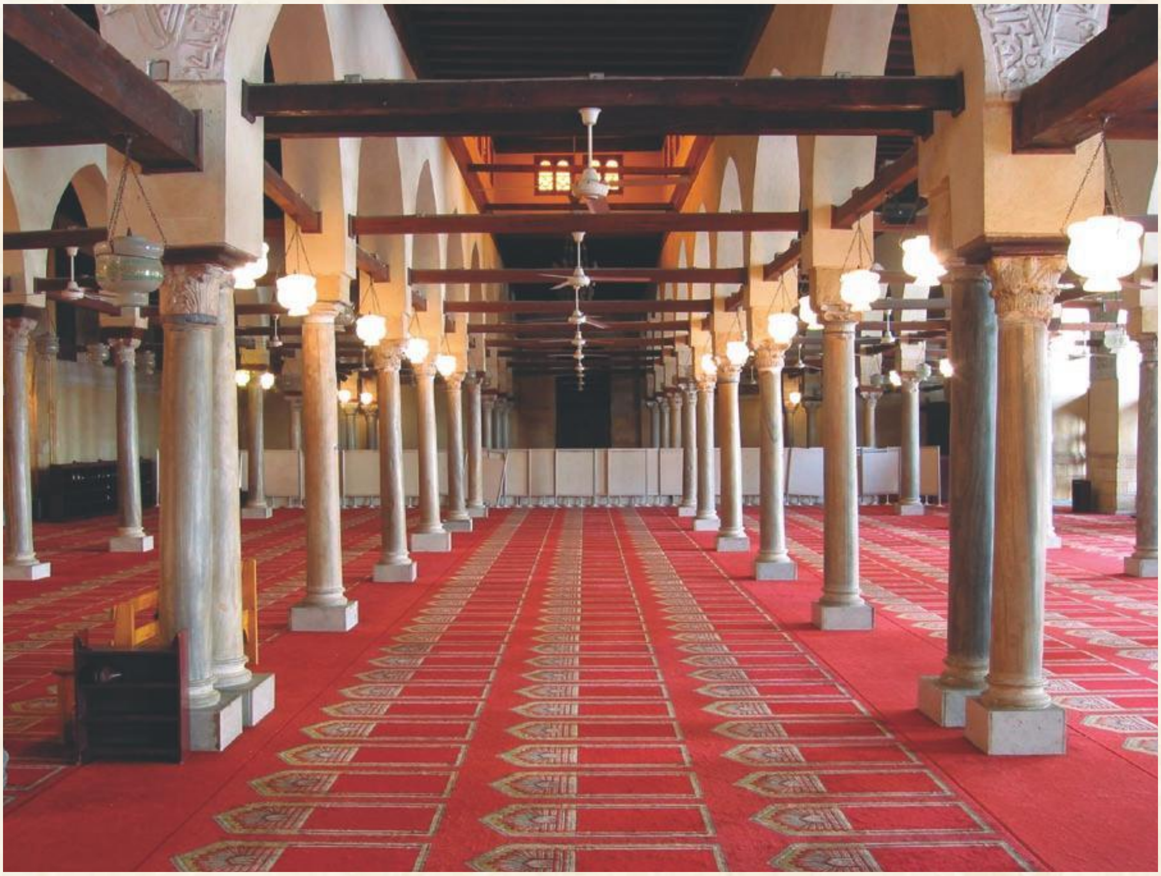
itself goes beyond all form or limitation. This art cannot therefore be imitated, but it radiates; we could also say that it reverberates and needs surroundings to echo in.

The term "mosque", which applies to every Muslim place of prayer, comes from the Arabic *masjid* which means a "place of prostration", and this shows implicitly that canonical prayer in Islam involves certain bodily gestures or positions.

There is nothing surprising in the body's being required to share in the act of adoration, when it is remembered that this act engages man in his totality—he must pray with his whole being and his whole awareness—and that this totality is conceived empirically only from the starting-point of the body. The body's integration into prayer demands its sacralization, and this is effected in the ablution preceding prayer; to bring the limbs into contact with water, an image of primordial indifferentiation, serves moreover, by analogy and according to intention, as a kind of restoration to the state of innocence.

Let us note in parentheses that there is a link between the sacralization of the body, as realized by ritual purifications, and the Islamic conception of sexuality.

The chief positions or attitudes of prayer are the following: the upright position facing the *qiblah*, in which the worshipper recites the words of prayer revealed in the Koran; then bowing, and prostration. The significance of these three attitudes, which are linked in a sequence of movement and repose to the accompaniment of sacred utterances, is clear: it is in the upright position, which distinguishes man from all other animals, that the believer speaks to God, or that God speaks through him; bowing is an act of homage by the servant to what surpasses him, while prostration is the abandonment of oneself to the will of an all-



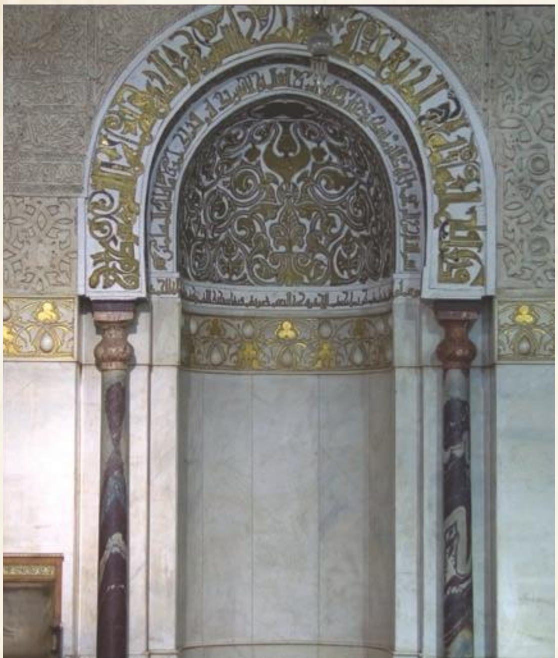
102. Prayer hall of al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, Egypt

powerful Lord. These three attitudes describe in space the directional segments of a cross, which esoteric science identifies with what might be termed the "existential dimensions" of man, namely: active and "upright" participation in the spirit which transcends the natural world, the unfolding of consciousness into the "horizontal" of existence and, finally, the creature's movement away from its divine source, a downward fall for which submission to the Divine Will compensates.

The actualization of these dimensions is equivalent to re-integrating them into "Adamic" equilibrium. And it is this equilibrium, by virtue of which man is all and nothing before God, which confers on Islamic art its plenitude, sobriety, and serenity.

2 The Miḥrāb

The prayer-niche, or *miḥrāb*, is indisputably a creation of sacred art, and has become in practice a regular element in the liturgy, though not an indispensable one. Art historians believe that this element was introduced into mosque architecture in the time of the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd and, more exactly, when this caliph rebuilt the mosque of the Prophet at Medina. But it is extremely probable that the niche replaced a more simple form, such as a false door, which showed the direction of Mecca in primitive mosques. If the *miḥrāb* in the cave beneath the rock of the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat aṣ-Ṣakhrah*) at Jerusalem goes back to the years during which this sanctuary was built (691-692), it is an example of this. This *miḥrāb* consists of an arch on small columns, carved in relief on a slab of marble. At the level of the capitals, there is a very simple inscription in Kūfī script across the back: the two Muslim declarations of faith. In the center of the background is a rosette with eight petals. An even simpler indication of the *qiblah* must have existed in the ancient mosque at Medina; according to certain accounts, a stone slab marked the spot where the Prophet stood to lead the communal prayers.



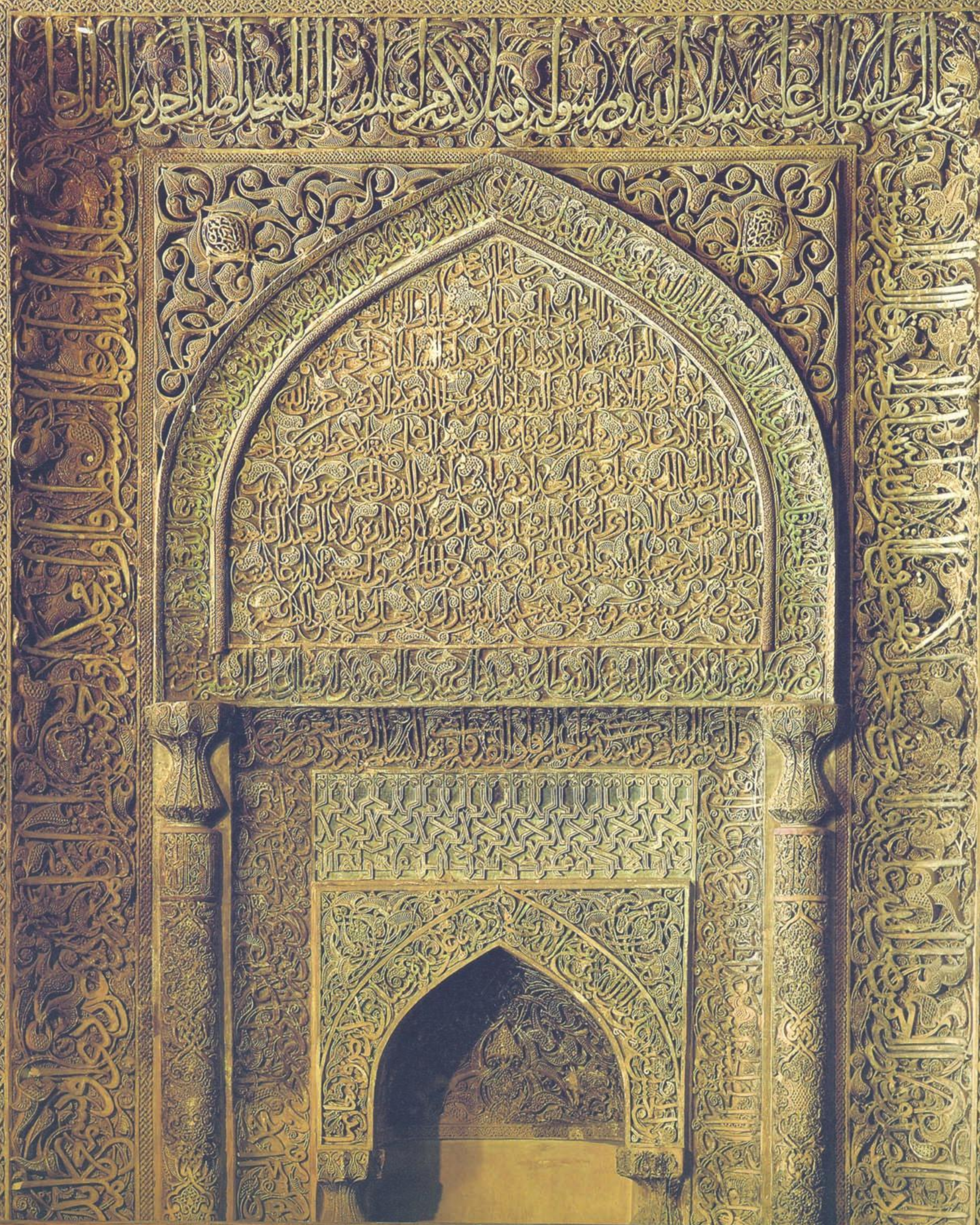
103. Fatimid *miḥrāb* of al-Azhar Mosque, Cairo, Egypt

The form of the niche may well have been suggested by the example of the apse in Coptic churches, or even by that of the liturgical niches in certain synagogues,[1] but these are no more than "incidental causes"; what matters is that the sacred niche derives from a worldwide symbolism, and that this symbolism is implicitly confirmed by the Koran.

Its very shape, with its vault corresponding to heaven and its piedroit to the earth, makes the niche a consistent image of the "cave of the world". The cave of the world is the "place of appearance" (*maẓhar*) of the Divinity, whether it be a case of the outward world as a whole or the inner world, the sacred cave of the heart. All oriental traditions recognize the significance of this, and the exedra of Roman basilicas is simply a worldly version of it, with the emperor replacing the divinity.[2]

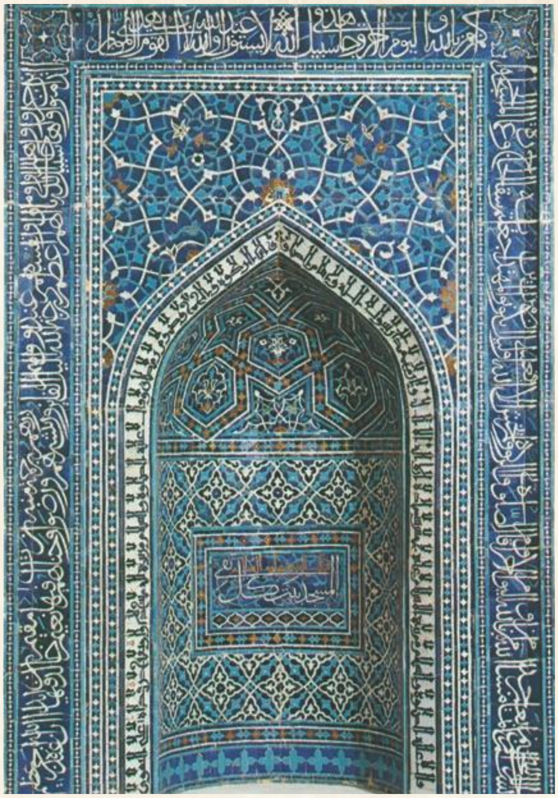
To establish the symbolism of the *miḥrāb* in its Islamic perspective, it must be related to its Koranic context. The word means, literally,

Opposite: **104**. *Miḥrāb* of Uljaytu in the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) in Iṣfahān, Persia, 1310

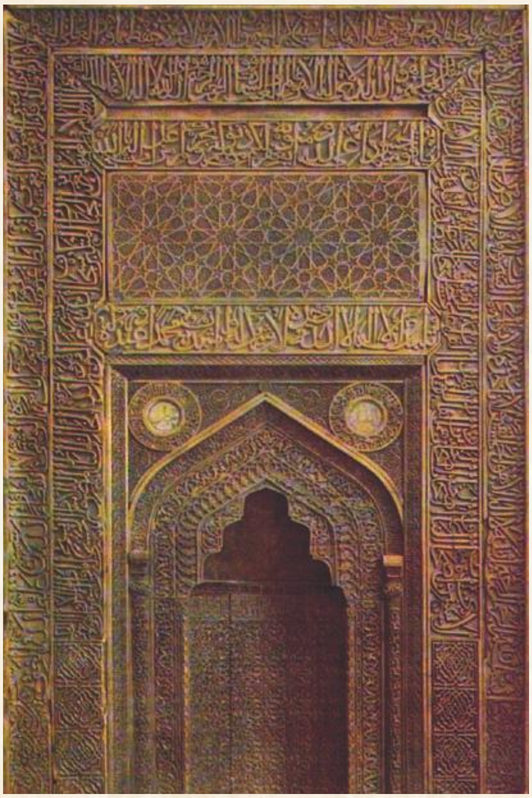




105. *Miḥrāb* of the Taybars Madrasah, Cairo, Egypt, Mamluk period



106. Tiled *miḥrāb* of the Madrasah Imāmi, Iṣfahān, Persia, 1325



107. Wooden *miḥrāb* of Tashun Pasha Mosque, near Urgub, Turkey, 13th century

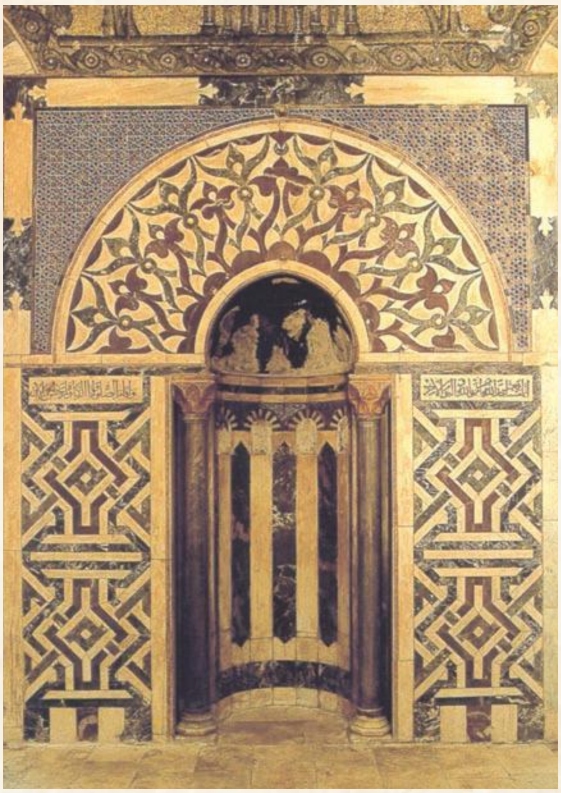


108. Tiled *miḥrāb* of the of Rüstem Pasha Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey, 1560

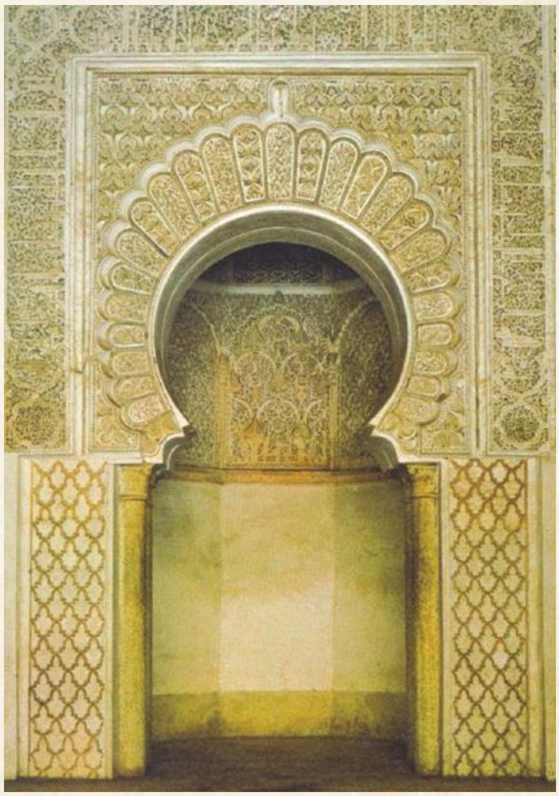
"refuge"; the Koran in particular uses this word to describe a secret place in the Temple at Jerusalem where the Holy Virgin entered into a spiritual retreat and was nourished by angels. It is identified by certain Arab commentators with the Holy of Holies, the *debir* of the Temple at Jerusalem, and this interpretation, which does not appear to take into account the Judaic laws governing access to the *debir*, accords in fact with the Patristic tradition and the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church.[3] The inscriptions round the arch of the *miḥrāb* are frequently such as to recall the Koranic story in question, especially in Turkish mosques, starting with the *miḥrāb* of the Hagia Sophia, thereby confirming its dedication to the Holy Virgin. The link between the *miḥrāb* and Sayyidatnā Maryam (Our Lady Mary) leads us again to the analogy between the prayer-niche and the heart: it is in the heart that the virgin-soul takes refuge to invoke God; as for the nourishment miraculously bestowed there, it corresponds to grace.

The form of the *miḥrāb*—discounting its name—calls to mind another passage from the Koran, the "verse of light", where the Divine Presence in the world or in the heart of man is compared to a light from a lamp placed in a niche (*mishkāh*): "God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The symbol of His light is a niche wherein is a lamp; the lamp is in a glass, and this glass is as a radiant star. (The light) is nourished by a blessed olive tree, which is neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil would all but glow though fire touch it not. Light upon light. God guideth to His Light whom He will, and God striketh symbols for man, and God knoweth all things" (24:35). The analogy between the *miḥrāb* and the *mishkāh* is clear; it is emphasized, moreover, by hanging a lamp before the prayer-niche.

Many of the oldest prayer-niches are adorned with a canopy in the form of a seashell. This motif is found already in Hellenistic art, but it would not have been incorporated into the art of Islam unless it had a spiritual



109. *Miḥrāb* of the Mausoleum of Sultan Baybars, Cairo, 13th century



110. *Miḥrāb* of the Ben Yūsuf Madrasah in Marrakesh, Morocco, 16th century

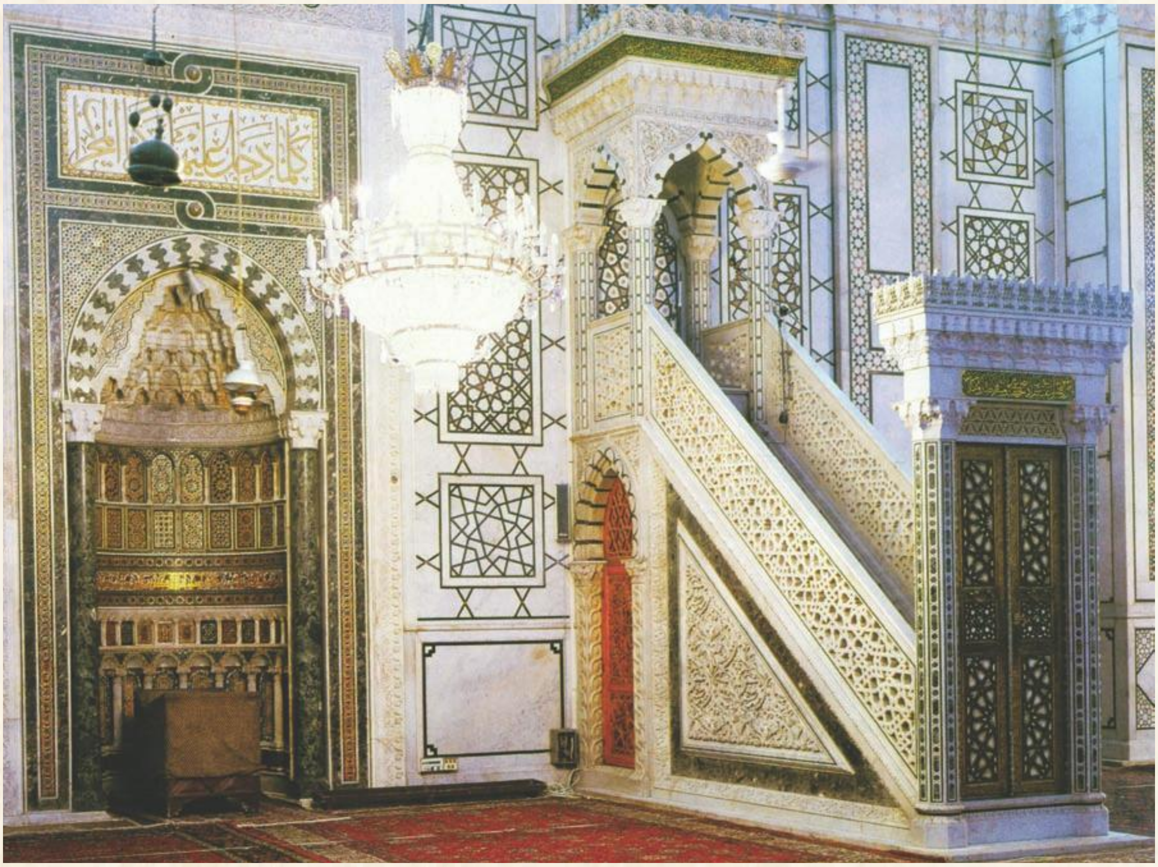
significance. The shell is associated with the pearl, which is one of the Islamic symbols of the Divine Word; according to a saying of the Prophet, the world was created from a white pearl. The sea-shell enclosing the pearl is like the "ear" of the heart receiving the Divine Utterance; it is, in fact, in the *miḥrāb* that this utterance is made.

It may seem surprising that a form such as the *miḥrāb* which is, after all, simply an accessory to the liturgy, should be the focus of a particularly rich and profound symbolism. But this is implicit proof of the link between sacred art and esoterism, the "science of the inward" (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*). It is on this same plane that the somewhat Christian typology of the prayer-niche is situated; it is in Islamic esoterism that certain Christly themes reappear, not in their historical or dogmatic content, but as patterns of the contemplative life.

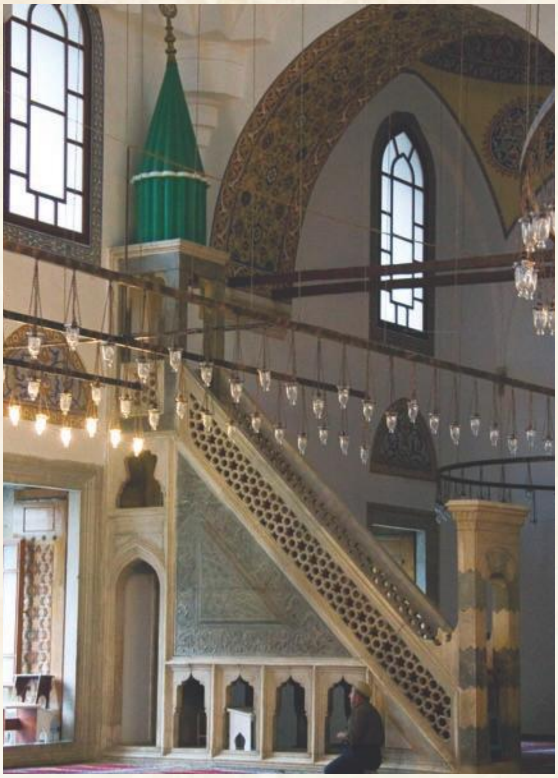
3 The Minbar

The Arabic term *al-jāmiʿ* which means literally "what brings together", refers to a mosque where the Friday prayers are celebrated together. The term has sometimes been translated "cathedral mosque", since, as a general rule, it is only mosques of this order which have a *cathedra*, a pulpit, called *minbar* in Arabic. The question remains to what extent the *minbar* corresponds to a bishop's chair, or even to a king's throne. Actually, it is neither the one nor the other, or it is both at the same time, since it is in some way an image of the Prophet's function and then of the function of his caliphs, and thus unites in itself both spiritual authority and temporal power.

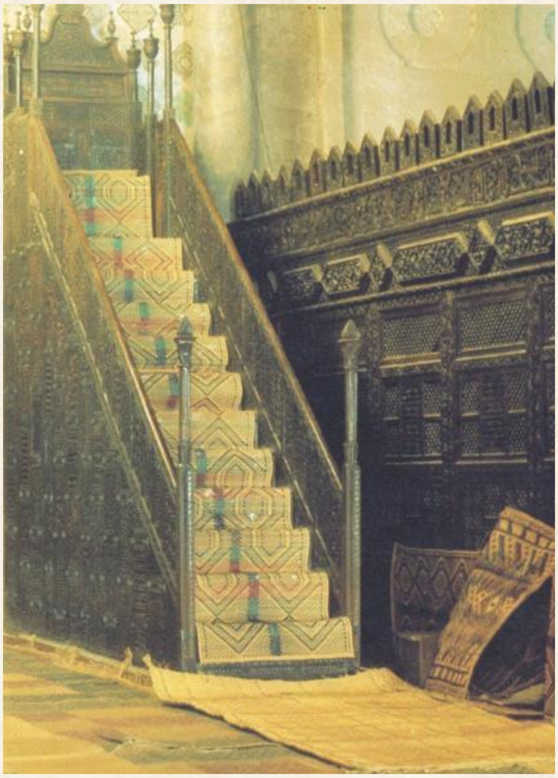
The prototype of the *minbar* is a sort of stepped stool which the Prophet used in his mosque at Medina to talk to the assembled faithful. According to certain traditional authorities, this stool had three levels. The Proph-



111. *Miḥrāb* and *minbar* of the Great Mosque at Damascus, Syria



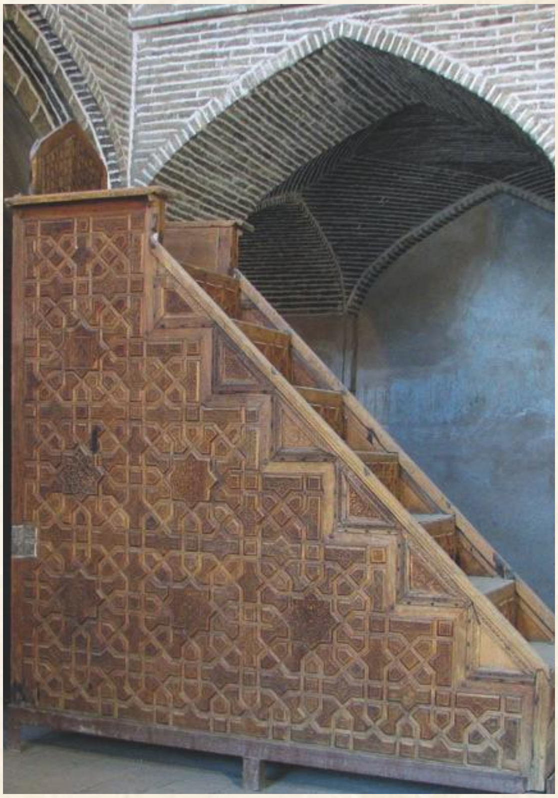
112. Marble *minbar* of the Selimiye Mosque in Konya, Turkey, 16th century



113. Wooden *minbar* in the Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia



114. *Minbar* of the Mosque of al-Muʾayyad in Cairo, Egypt



115. *Minbar* in the side prayer hall in the western arcade of the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) in Iṣfahān, Persia

et sat upon the third level and rested his feet on the second. After him, Abū Bakr, the first caliph, sat on the second level and rested his feet on the first: ʿUmar, the second caliph, took his seat on the third level and placed his feet on the ground. The hierarchical sense of the levels is clear.

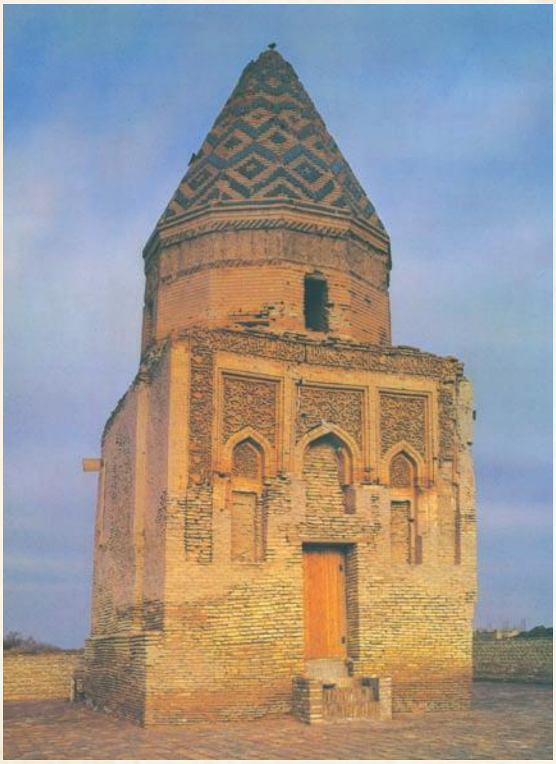
According to other sources, the original *minbar* at Medina had six steps. The oldest surviving *manābir* (plural of *minbar*) have from seven to eleven, and this multiplication of levels is easily explained by the custom which requires the *imām* to preach his Friday sermon from one of the *minbar*'s lower levels. He stands up to speak, head and shoulders covered in a white cloth and a staff in his hand. Between the two canonical sections of the sermon, exhortation of the faithful and praise of the Prophet, he sits briefly on the nearest step. The upper steps of the *minbar*, and in particular the top one, which is adorned with a head-board in the manner of a throne, are left empty; they recall the pre-eminent function of the Prophet.

The overall shape of the *minbar* bespeaks the continuity of tradition; it always takes the form of a staircase, fairly narrow and nearly always enclosed by hand-rails. Since the Seljuk period, this simple structure has been supplemented by a canopy sheltering the topmost level and by a doorway at the foot of the stairs. These additions have simply accentuated the *minbar*'s symbolism which corresponds to the ladder of the worlds—the most broadly spaced levels are the corporeal world, the psychic world, and the world of pure spirit—and to the throne as a "polar" station. None of these points of significance was added later; they result logically from the first action of the Prophet in choosing a stool with three steps to preside over the assembled believers.

The fact that the uppermost level of the *minbar*, the throne sheltered by its canopy, remains empty, is strangely reminiscent of the awaiting throne which, in both Buddhism and Christianity, represents the unseen presence of the *Logos* or of the *Tathagata* or, in other terms, the unseen presence of the Divine Messenger. But this is certainly not a case of an influence coming from outside Islam, but of a coincidence due to the universal character of symbolism.

4 Tombs

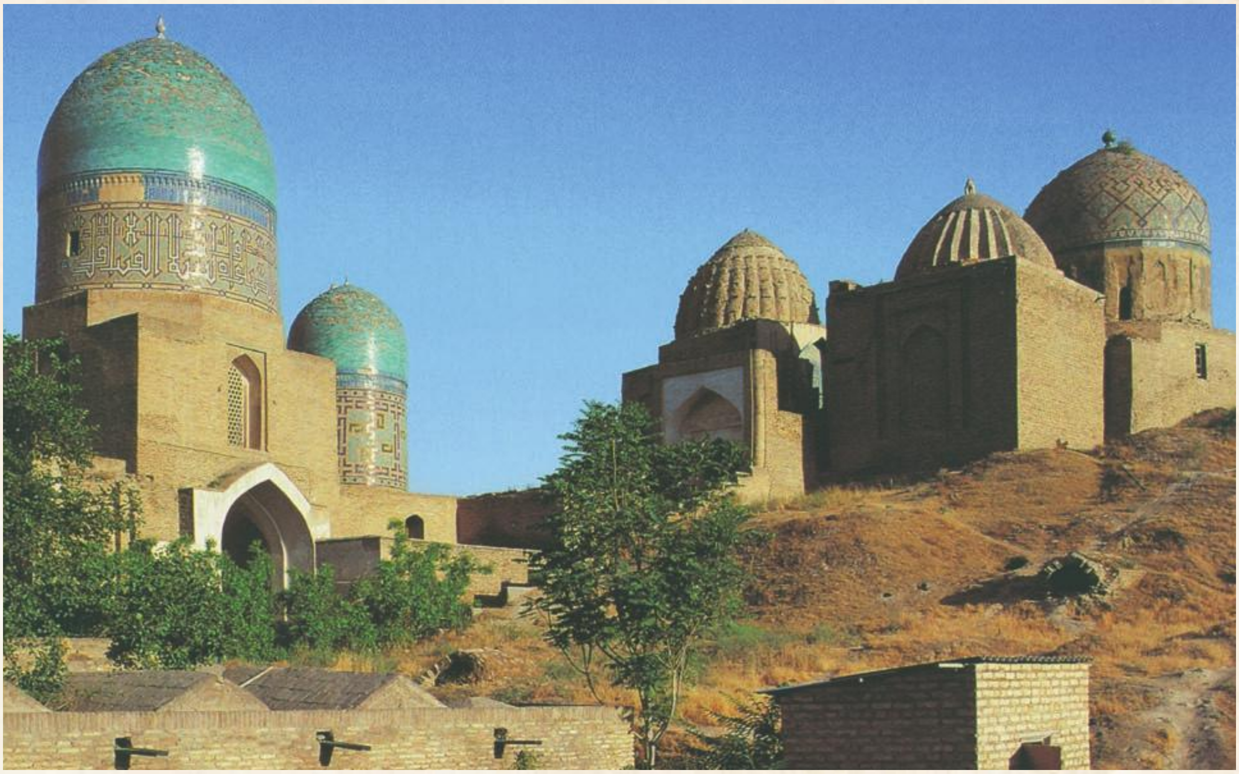
That a great many mausoleums are found in Islamic lands is something of a paradox, for the glorification of the dead is foreign to the spirit of Islam. "The most beautiful tomb", said the Prophet, "is one that vanishes from the face of the earth"; and the Koran says, "All who are upon it (the earth) are fleeting, and there abides only the face of thy Lord full of majesty and generosity" (55:26-27). This paradox is explicable by two factors that are in a way ineluctable, the first of which is the ambition of sovereigns to perpetuate their names; implying as it does a wish for personal glory, this ambition is perhaps not altogether Islamic but it is, after all, fairly



116. Mausoleum of Fakhr ad-Dīn Rāzī, Kunya Urgench, Turkmenistan, 12th century



117. View of the Mamluk necropolis, Cairo, Egypt



118. Shāh-i-Zindah ensemble of cemeteries in Samarqand, Uzbekistan



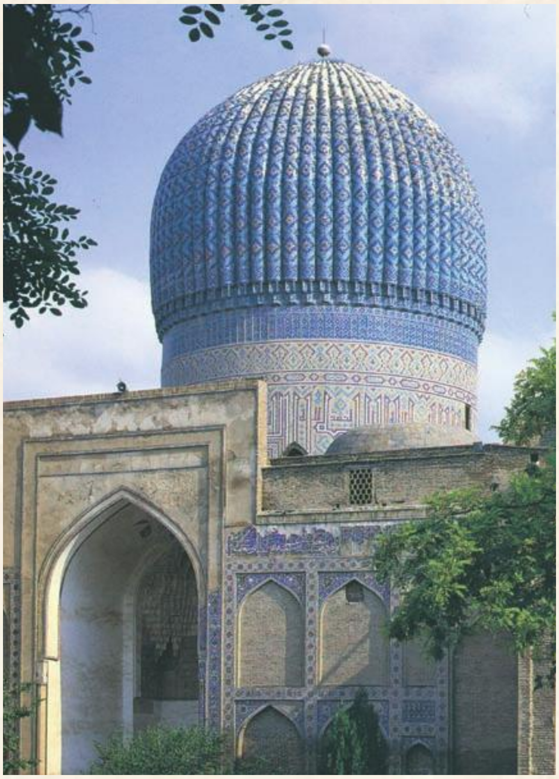
119. Tomb of Humāyūn, Delhi, India, Mughal period, 16th century



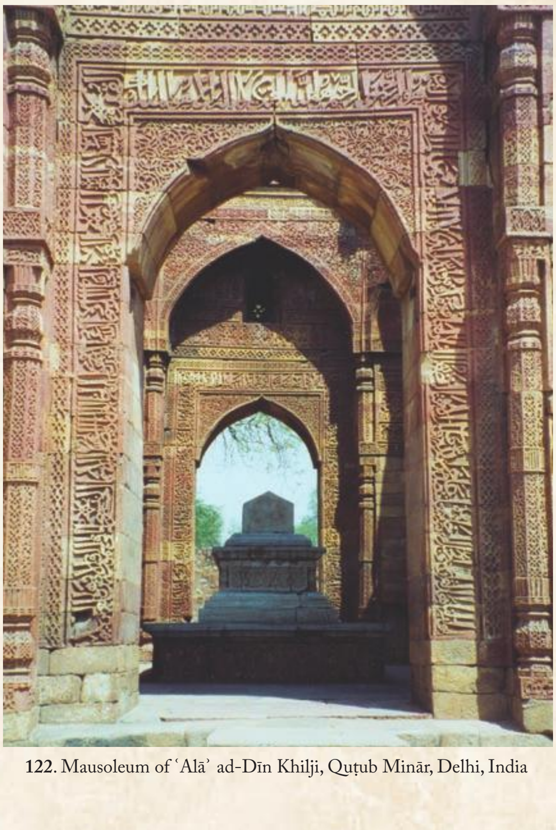
120. Tomb of Iʿtimād ad-Daula in Agra, India, Mughal period, 17th century

natural and it is made legitimate by the hope that the soul of the deceased shall benefit from the prayers offered up for it by the visitors to the tomb. The second factor follows closely upon the first, and consists in the wish of the community of believers to honor the saints, whom they

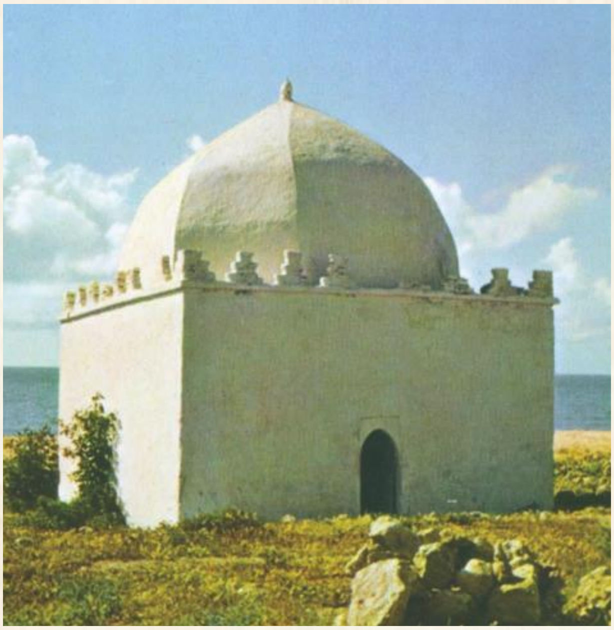
see as the true kings of the earth as much as, or more than, princes. The proliferation of princely mausoleums coincides historically with the coming to power of the Seljuks who, perhaps, retained and transposed the funeral customs of their Central Asian ancestors, for their tombs greatly resemble ceremonial *yurts*. In the same period, that is, from the twelfth to the fourteenth century, the general veneration of saints, among both people and sovereigns, reached its definitive form with the organization of Sufism—the mysticism of Islam—into orders or brotherhoods, each with its chain of founding or renovating masters. The Muslim saint (*walī*) is nearly always a contemplative whose state of spiritual perfection finds permanent expression in the teaching bequeathed to his disciples. To this bequest, to a greater or lesser degree esoteric, there is generally superadded the spontaneous veneration of the people, and it is this which effects his "canonization", and not some ecclesiastical institution. We have no hesitation in translating the Arabic term *walī-Allāh*, literally "friend of God", by the word "saint", for what is understood by the one term as much as by the other is a man who has become the object and instrument of a divine grace. What is sought at the tomb of a *walī* is his *barakah*, his "blessing" or spiritual influence, which remains active and is in a way linked with the corporeal remains of a man who was in life a recipient as it were, of the Divine Presence. Moreover, the saint is not thought of as being dead, but as mysteriously alive, according to this passage from the Koran: "Say not of them that were killed in the path of God that they are dead; they are alive, but ye perceive not" (2:154). This verse refers in its most immediate sense to those who fall in the holy war, and many of the tombs venerated are in fact *martyria* (*mashāhid*), burial places of those who fought against the enemies of Islam. But since the Prophet described the struggle against the passions of the soul as "the greatest holy war" (*al-jihād al-akbar*), this verse applies *a priori* to all those who have sacrificed their lives to the contemplation of God. The veneration



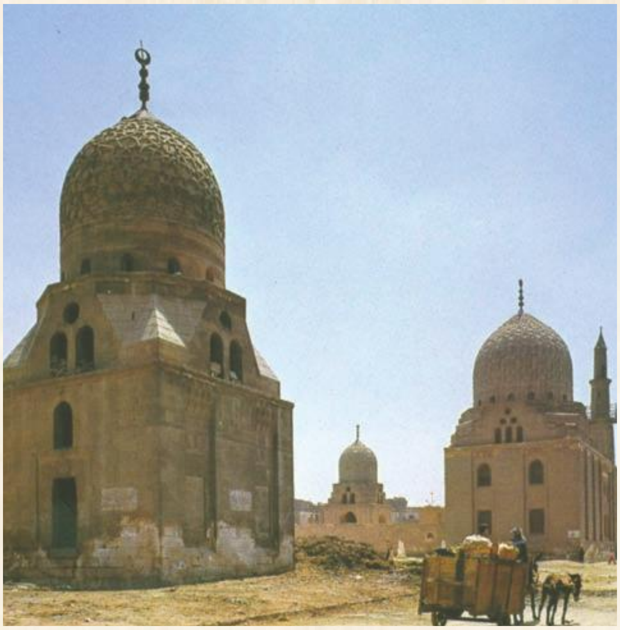
121. Gur-i-Amir Mausoleum, Samarqand, Uzbekistan



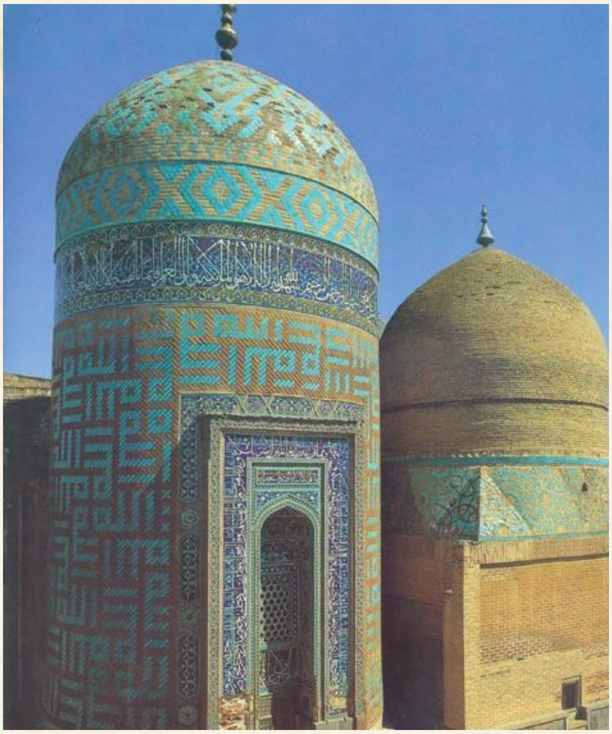
122. Mausoleum of ʿAlāʾ ad-Dīn Khilji, Quṭub Minār, Delhi, India



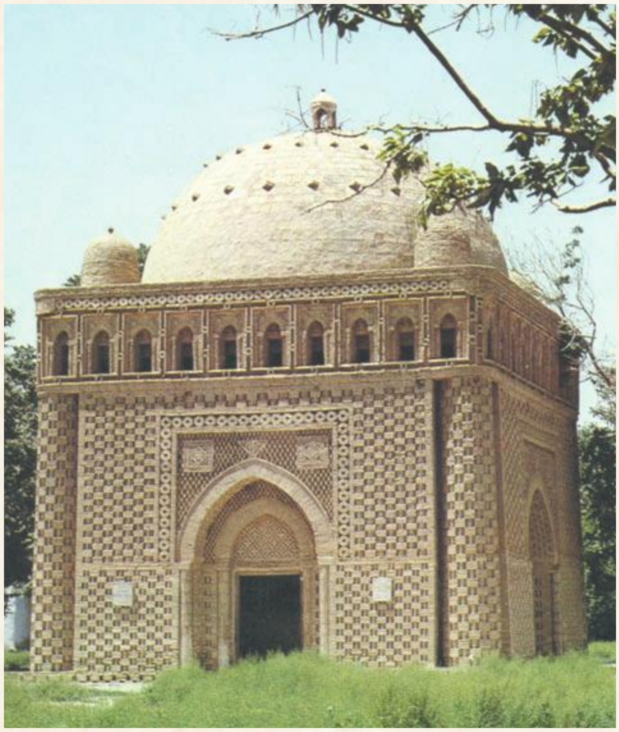
123. Tomb of a *marabout* (venerated saint) in Morocco



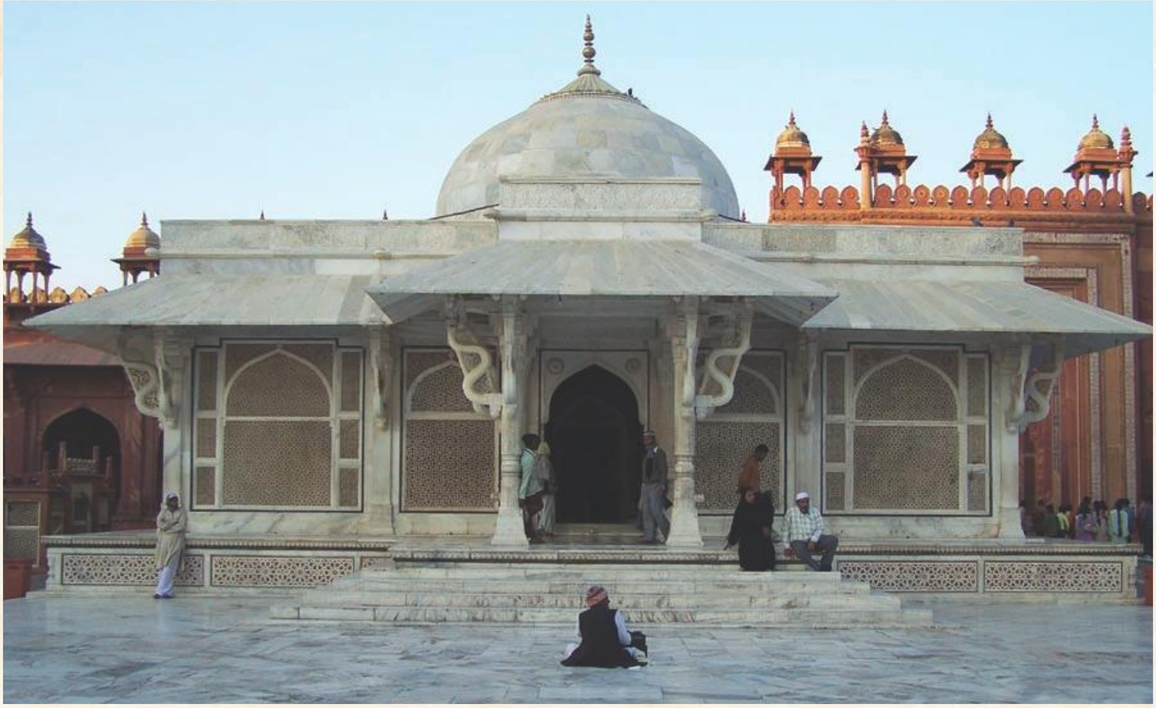
124. Al-Qarāfa cemetery, Cairo, Egypt



125. Shaykh Ṣafī ad-Dīn Mausoleum, Arbedil, Persia, 14th century



126. Mausoleum of the Samanids, Bukhara, Uzbekistan, 10th century



127. Tomb of Salīm Chishti at Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, India

of saints is, moreover, a kind of reflection of the veneration accorded to the Prophet, whose tomb at Medina is second as a place of pilgrimage only to the sanctuary of Mecca.

Whereas the mausoleums of princes were usually built by the persons who expected to repose in them, those of saints were the gift either of their disciples or of sovereigns, like the famous tomb of Salīm Chishti at Fatehpur Sikri built by the Emperor Akbar, or of the nameless common people.

Besides the mausoleums of princes and the tombs of saints, there are the funerary monuments dedicated to descendants of the Prophet. Their architectural forms give all these monuments an equal dignity; the mausoleum of a great conqueror like Tamerlane is simply a glorification of God, and the tomb of one of "God's poor" often stands as a token of homage to his spiritual kingship.

The interior of a mausoleum generally contains a cenotaph indicating the spot where the deceased is buried, or laid to rest, in a crypt of indeterminate depth. There is also a *miḥrāb* showing the direction of Mecca, but so placed that persons at prayer shall not face the tomb.

Mausoleums of princes are occasionally grouped around the tomb of a saint in such a way as to constitute, together with all the more humble graves that come to be placed nearby, veritable "cities of the dead" like the necropolis of Shāh-i-Zindah ("The Living King") at Samarqand or that of the Mamluk tombs at Cairo. These "cities of the dead" have nothing mournful or sad about them; as in all Muslim cemeteries, the dominant note is serenity.

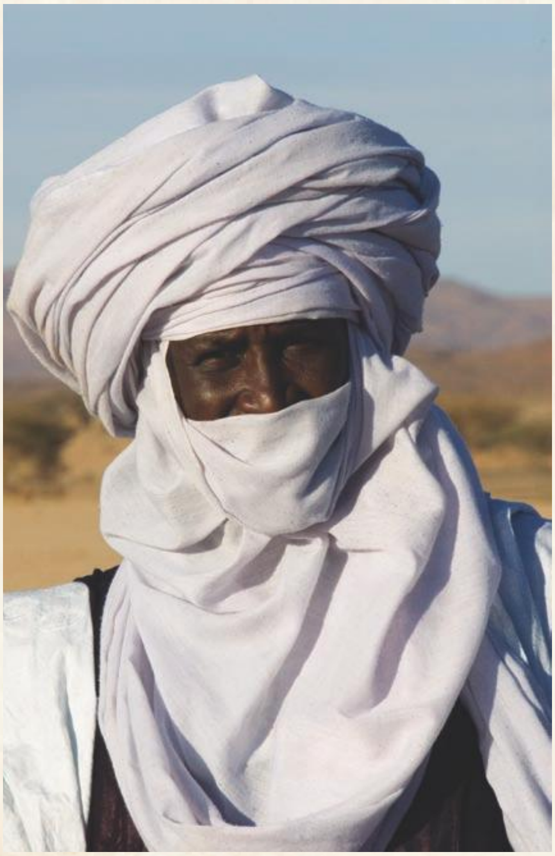
There is one architectural formula that has come to be most prevalently used for relatively simple mausoleums, namely, the cube crowned with a cupola, the transition between the two usually being mediated by a polygon. Funerary buildings of this sober form predominate in Muslim cemeteries and rise as landmarks on the edges of the desert and the sea-coasts from the Atlantic to India. Often whitened with lime, they attract the eye from afar and hold it by their image of an equilibrium that reconciles heaven with earth.

5 The Art of Apparel

We have alluded to the liturgical role of clothing. Let us make clear that there are no priestly vestments in Islam because, properly speaking, there is no priesthood; but neither is there any clothing that is Muslim and profane. What determines Muslim costume in general is first of all the *Sunnah*, the example given by the Prophet, and secondly the fact that clothing must suit the movements and positions of the prescribed prayers. It is in this latter respect that Imām Mālik condemns clothing that clings to the body; in fact the traditional clothing of all Muslim peoples is distinguished by its ample cut; it conceals the body, or part of the body, at the same time as adapting itself to the body's movements.

The example given by the Prophet amounts to no more than a few guidelines which permit a great deal of liberty in the art of dress, while indicating the limits set on the one hand by spiritual poverty and, on the other, by the dignity of the *imām*, which pertains in principle to every Muslim of male sex and mature years. It is known that the Prophet took the occasion to wear clothes of various colors and various places of origin as if to demonstrate that Islam would spread to different ethnic surroundings; however, he preferred white and rejected excessively sumptuous materials, while insisting on the need for certain of his Companions to mark their rank and standing in the community. He forbade men to wear gold ornaments or silken robes, reserving these for women. Gold is by its nature sacred, and Islam reserves it for the domain which is, for Islam, *sacratum* (*ḥarām*) *par excellence*, that of woman, conjugal love, and family life sheltered from all public gaze.

It is fashionable to question the authenticity of *aḥādīth* extolling the wearing of the turban. Now whether the saying "the turban is the crown of Islam" is the word of the Prophet or not, this saying is in any case expressive of the inherent significance of this item of manly apparel, which proclaims both the majesty of the believer who is "God's representative on earth" and his submission (*islām*) to God's will. In the Semitic environment, it is always a token of reverential fear to keep the head covered, no doubt because to expose it to the sun is symbolically equivalent to exposing it to the divine rigor. It may well be suggested that the turban became an integral part of Muslim costume because it was worn by the Arabian Bedouins, but this is not proved nor, for that matter, does it disprove our point. It was only natural that Arab costume should have been spread by the Islamic conquests, but the positive value of this phenomenon lies in the simple fact that the Prophet had taken over certain Arabian and Bedouin customs, rectifying them and transposing them into a spiritual ordinance. It is extremely probable that loosely cut garments, which are eminently suitable for the desert climate with its extremes of temperature, are of



128. Tuareg from Niger



129. Women from Tafilalet, Morocco



130. Iraqi bedouin

Arab origin, and one can be certain that garments of very simple cut like the *ʿabāʾa*, or the seamless *ḥāʾik* which covers the head and shoulders, are of nomadic origin. It is perhaps the Maghribī costume—a long tunic, a rectangular robe with or without sleeves, burnous, and turban wrapped in a *litham*—that constitutes the most typically Arab and Muslim style, for it sits equally well on the scholar of Islamic sciences, the warrior chief, and the man of the people. Its beauty and dignity are at one with its simplicity. In the Islamic East, Turkish and Mongol influence are responsible for a greater diversity in forms of dress which, however, are never incompatible with the general Islamic style of apparel; a host of Muslim pilgrims from the most diverse countries is always recognizably a host of Muslims.

We are considering masculine garb in particular, for women's dress has far less unity since it is made for life at home, and women go veiled in the streets. Feminine garb is happy to hold on to certain items of a regional character and to retain occasional forms of apparel of great antiquity, such as the robe made from a single piece of unstitched cloth, draped around the



131. Arabian shaykh

body and secured by two clasps at the shoulders, which is found in particular among certain tribes in the Sahara.

Men's garb in Islamic countries makes for the effacement of social differences, with the exception of certain extravagances of dress deriving either from princely courts or, again, from groups of ascetics who have cut themselves off from the world. These latter may well follow the example of the Prophet, who occasionally wore a robe made up of pieces of cloth stitched together.

The art of apparel is made all the more important in Islamic countries by the absence of any human image; it is the art of clothing that in a way conveys the Muslim's ideal image of himself as a Muslim. There is, moreover, no art that has a more telling effect on a man's soul than that of clothing, for a man instinctively identifies himself with the clothes he wears. It is vain to say that "the habit does not make the monk"; in a certain sense there is no monk without an appropriate habit.

The art of clothing is an essentially collective one; it is therefore subject to fluctuations and obeys, to some degree or other, the psychological law referred to by Ibn Khaldūn, according to which conquered peoples imitate the manners and clothing of their conquerors. Despite this, Muslim dress shows such historical and geographical continuity that one can attribute it only to that positive quality of the *ummah*, the religious collectivity, which moved the Prophet to say "my community will never be single-minded in error".

The gradual disappearance of traditional Muslim costume in favor of modern European dress can be only partly explained by the law of psychology referred to above. This form of "acculturation" does amount to imitating the man who holds in his hands the means of power and success, and modern European clothing has become the emblem of material efficiency. At the same time, a more acute change of direction in the soul is involved. There is a turning away from a way of life entirely dominated by



132. Men wearing the *burnous*, Rabat, Morocco



133. Tuareg women from the Sahara desert

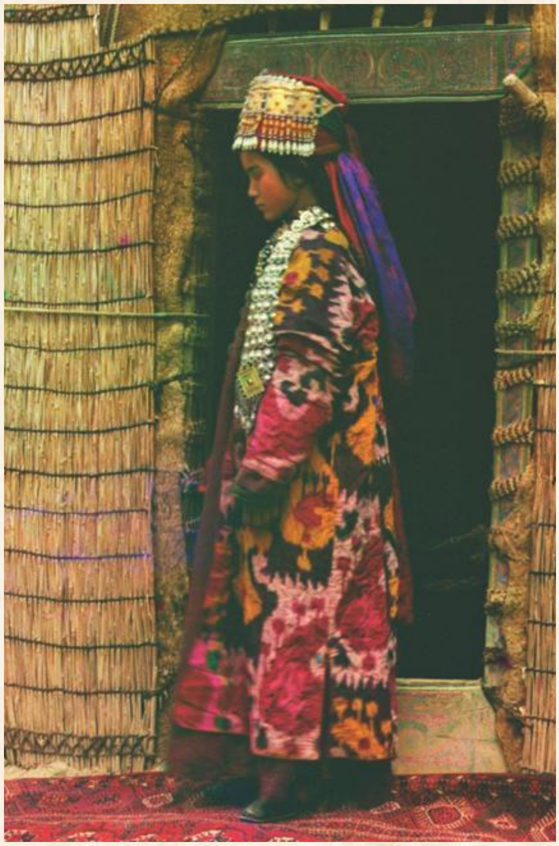
contemplative values with its bearings fixed on the hereafter; the aim is to be in the "here and now", on the level of newspaper events. Modern European dress is welcome in such a perspective, because it expresses individualism, an attitude that stands outside all that is sacred, in the same way as egalitarianism has nothing in common with the self-effacement of the Muslim within the *ummah*, but represents a leveling down, a negation of any élite, whether of nobility or saints.

One could well believe that modern European dress had been expressly invented to destroy the patterns of Muslim life; it makes the ablutions prescribed by the Koran difficult, and directly impedes the movements and positions of the canonical prayer by its stiff folds. If it is not within its power to destroy the inner value of these rites, it detracts none the less from the radiation of their value by the unavoidable triviality of its associations.

The teaching that inheres in the traditional apparel of Islam is, in sum, that the human body, created "according to the form" of God, is a kind of revelation. This is true of man as he was before the Fall, and still is in virtuality, although he bears the marks of his decadence upon him, which love alone forgives. Thus it is fitting that the body should be veiled at least in part, but not that it should have forms imposed on it that are not its own. To veil the body is not to deny it, but to withdraw it like gold, into the domain of things concealed from the eyes of the crowd.



134. Women from Ramallah, Palestine



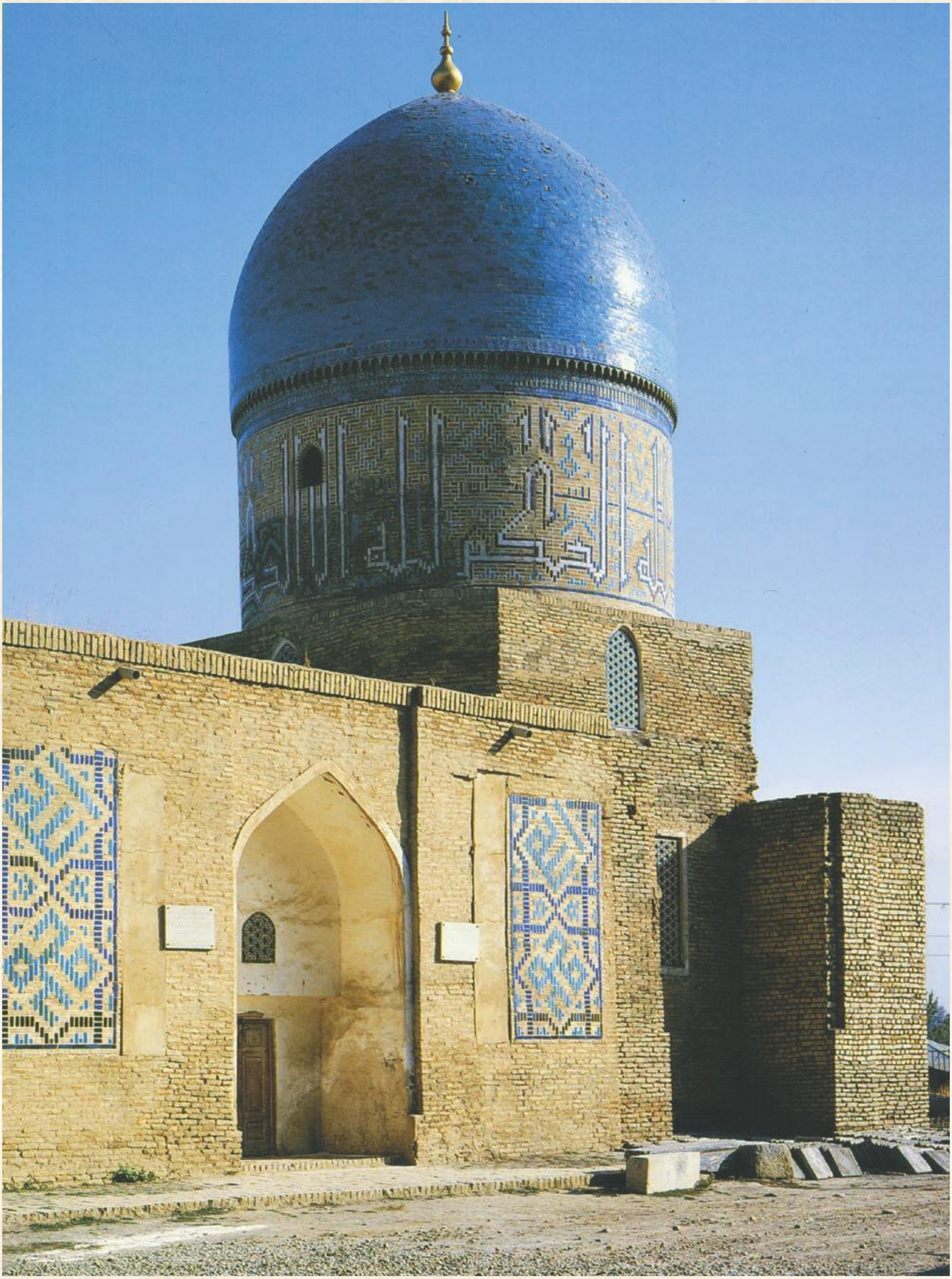
135. Turcoman or Tirgiz woman in front of her *yurt*, Turkestan

Notes to Chapter V

1. For example, a sacred niche in the underground necropolis of Mea Shearim, which is very like a *miḥrāb*.

2. In Hindu iconography also, divine appearances are usually surrounded by an arch representing the cosmos.

3. According to this tradition, Zacharias took Mary as a child into the Holy of Holies because he recognized that she was herself the holy tabernacle.



136. Ṭillā Kārī Madrasah and Mosque, Registan, Samarqand, Uzbekistan

Chapter VI

The Art of Sedentaries and Nomadic Art

1 *Dynasties and Ethnic Groups*

The different styles of Muslim art are usually named after the dynasties which reigned during the periods, and over the countries, in which these styles appeared, and this implicitly confirms the determining role played in Muslim art by the patronage of sovereigns. It is they who built the great mosques and universities and who encouraged the refinements of such lesser arts as ceramics, damascene ware, or the weaving of brocade. Sovereigns very often recruited craftsmen from various countries or regions to realize some great architectural project, and thereby contributed to new syntheses of style which bear their names.

More important still is the fact that each dynasty coincides with the hegemony of a particular ethnic group. As the great Maghribī historian Ibn Khaldūn explained very convincingly, each dynasty is normally answerable to a certain tribe or race which brings it to power and keeps it there, while itself assuming the role of an aristocracy in relation to the subject people, as warriors in the first place and later as administrators. In most cases, this aristocracy is of Bedouin or nomadic origin, and it can be stated without excessive generalization that there have been no founders of empire in the world of Islam who did not come either from the desert or the steppes, starting with the Arabs themselves who were in turn replaced by Turks, Mongols, and Berbers from the Sahara.

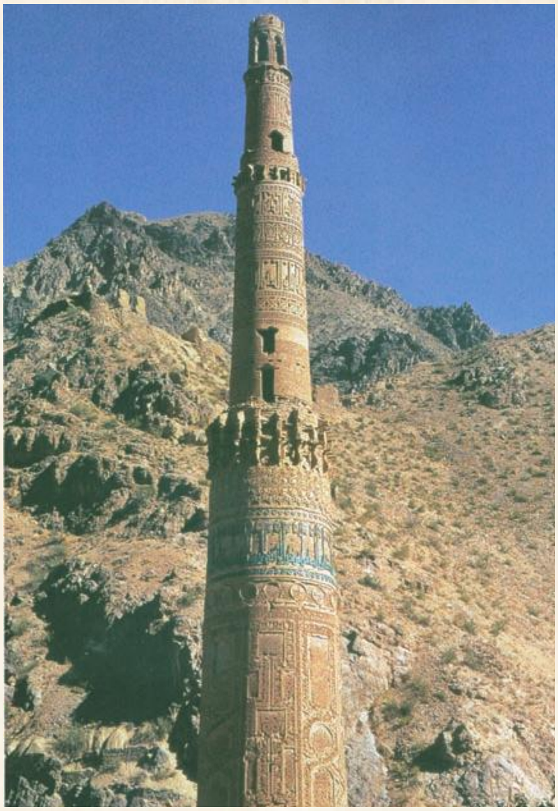
In the world conquered by the Arabs, the nomad Turks appeared relatively early, at first as slaves and mercenaries who beat out a track to power. Already under the Abbasids, the Turkish pretorian guards were becoming increasingly powerful. It was one of these, Ibn Ṭūlūn, who became in the year 868 A.D. the Governor of Egypt and then, in practice, its autonomous master. He founded his own dynasty, as did Maḥmūd of Ghazna, the son of another Turkish governor, who carved out a kingdom for himself in Eastern Persia, starting in 1037, and then fell upon India as a conqueror in the Punjab, Hindustan, and Gujarat. Somewhat different was the lot of the Mamluks, who held Egypt for the lengthy period extending from 1250 to 1517 A.D.; they were not, strictly speaking, a dynasty but a sort of military caste consisting exclusively and paradoxically of former Turcoman slaves



137. Brick and tilework decoration in the Ṭillā Kārī Madrasah and Mosque, Registan, Samarqand, Uzbekistan



138. The minaret of the Kutūbiyyah Mosque in Marrakesh, Morocco, built towards the end of the 12th century by the Almohads, a conquering mountain tribe



139. The minaret of Jam, Afghanistan, built towards the end of the 12th century by the Ghorids, a conquering mountain tribe

who had usurped power and appointed their own chiefs and princes. The word *mamlūk* actually means "slave". In all these cases, the nomad element, if it may still be so considered, was no more than a very restricted ethnic minority but its role was decisive.

Quite other was the invasion of the Seljuks, also Turks, who in the mid eleventh century poured out of Central Asia into Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Asia Minor. This was a case of the emigration of an entire people, who shared out the above territories among themselves in a welter of princedoms, which were at first united and later divided. The Seljuks brought with them the customs and art forms of their homeland.

On their tracks came the Mongols of Chingiz Khān (Genghis Khan), destroying Samarqand, Bukhārā, Khwārizm, and Herat to create around themselves the emptiness of steppe and desert. Under Hülagü they conquered Baghdad in 1258 A.D. and brought an end to the Abbasid Caliphate. They threw back the Seljuks of Asia Minor as far as the borders of Byzantium and, as it were, prepared them by a terrible test of strength for their second and more glorious expansion; it was the Seljuk tribe of the Ottomans who, surviving this test, conquered Constantinople and created the new Turkish empire. This conquest differs from all other nomadic exploits, for the Seljuks of Rūm in Asia Minor had already become sedentaries before undergoing the shock of the Mongol advance; thus they arrived in Byzantine territory, not as nomads or barbarians, but having already assimilated the culture of the countries they had crossed.

The Mongols, who settled in Iran and Mesopotamia, became in their turn sedentaries and Muslims. The second wave of Mongols,

the Timurids, are distinct from the former in that they came, not from the outside, from non-Muslim Asia, but from that part of Central Asia which was already a seat of Islam; it was from Samarqand, which he had rebuilt, that the fearsome Tīmūr-i Lang (Tamerlane), chieftain of a Turco-Mongol tribe, conquered Iran, Mesopotamia, Syria, and Asia Minor and descended upon India. He died in 1405 A.D. while campaigning against China.

One branch of the Timurids made itself master of Northern India and founded the great Mughal empire; from being uncouth nomad warriors, they transformed themselves into protectors and promoters of one of the most refined and resplendent civilizations that has ever existed.

We have spoken so far about nomadic invasions from Central Asia. A second reservoir of nomadic peoples, who periodically burst out into more fertile regions, is the Sahara. The Almoravids (*al-murābiṭūn*), who, towards the middle of the eleventh century, conquered Morocco, Algeria, and finally Spain as far as the Tagus, were nomadic Berbers from the deep Sahara on the banks of the Niger. The Almohads (*al-muwaḥḥidūn*) who followed and replaced them came, not from the desert, but from the mountains of the High Atlas, which is quite another matter; there is, nevertheless, a certain analogy between nomads and mountain peoples, since the latter practice a shifting form of livelihood, and both are used to a harsh and independent way of life.

As recently as the nineteenth century, the southern fringe of the Sahara provided the setting for the foundation of a theocratic empire by the Fulani (Fulbe) nomads.

The advent to power of nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples occurs within an overall demographic movement which flows periodically from arid regions to more fertile ones, and which assumes the character of a violent conquest only when a certain political and military weakness on the part of sedentary communities invites aggression. Once victorious and settled in towns, the nomad conquerors gradually lose their warlike prowess and are not slow to succumb in their turn to a fresh wave of Bedouins.



140. Minaret of the Great Mosque in Agadez, Niger

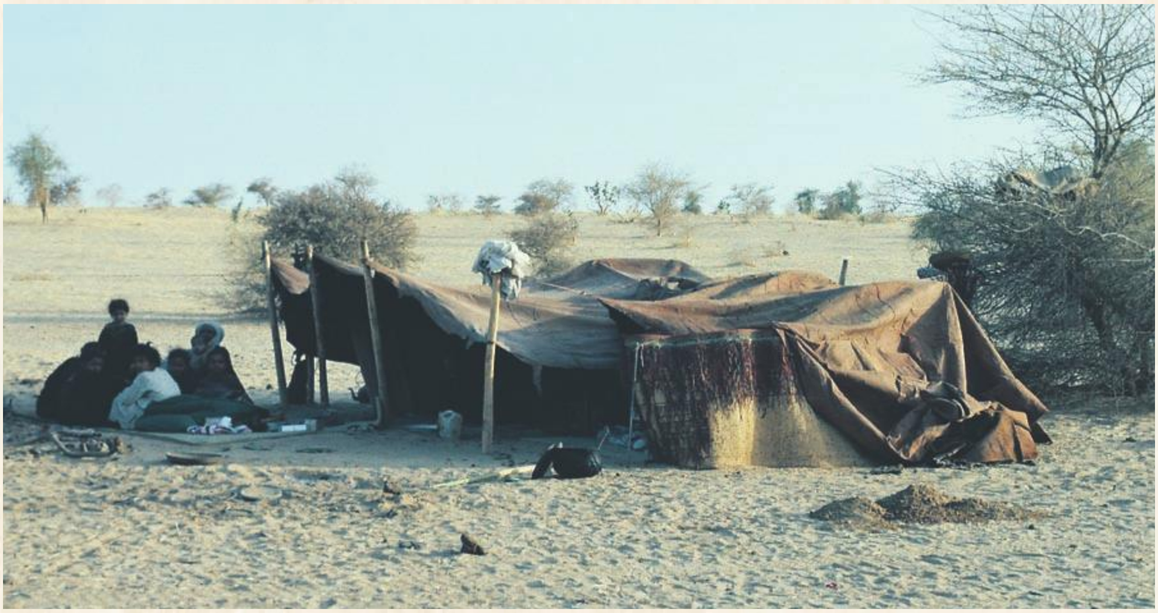
It will be noted in this context that all the countries of "classical Islam", from Morocco to India, are located in fertile zones bordering on great spaces that are more or less desert, where the meager vegetation provides a livelihood only for breeders of camels or sheep, whose flocks roam ceaselessly over vast expanses of land. The contrast between sedentaries and nomads is thus prefigured in the very geography of Islam, but it would be wrong to see this simply in terms of an economic or social problem whose solution would lie in suppressing the nomadic way of life; nomads are not synonymous with the disinherited, and they have never so considered themselves. On the contrary, they are convinced that their way of life is the expression

of a free choice of which they are proud. For the nomad, the sedentary is, as it were, his own prisoner, and for the sedentary, the nomad is a barbarian or even a savage. There is no doubt that these two ways of living are each favorable to different human qualities—different yet complementary; they represent something like the two halves of the totality that is mankind.

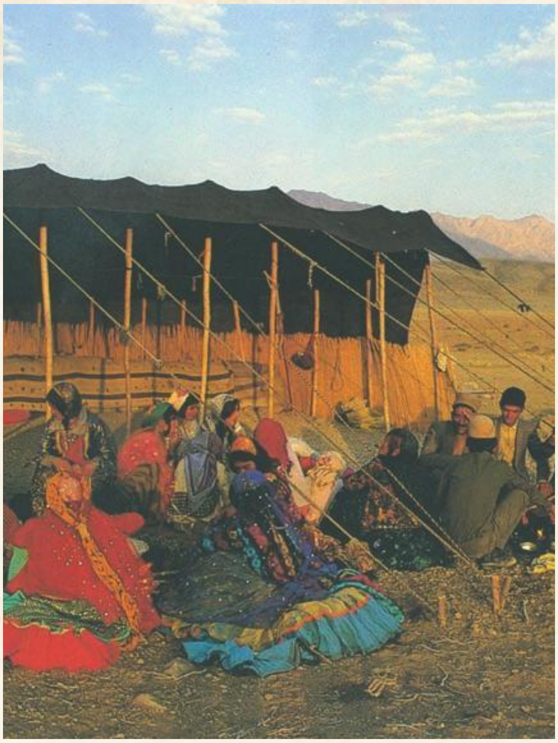
The irruption of nomadic peoples into city cultures has often been painful. The most terrible was when the Mongols under Chingiz Khān, in the first half of the thirteenth century, invaded and devastated Iran, Iraq, and Asia Minor. However, none of these invasions was able to wreck the continuity of Islamic art. After the conquering nomads, whether Turks, Mongols, or Berbers, had settled down in the towns, they made it their duty to protect the arts and sciences, which were then reborn with new strength, as if the breath from the desert had separated out what was most typically Islamic in them. This is true even of architecture, for all that it is a specifically sedentary art.

A European traveler of the sixteenth century, who visited Samarqand, the then Timurid capital, has described the extraordinary scenes when Turco-Mongol chieftains were having immense mosques and universities erected while themselves living in their tents set up in the midst of gardens.[1] The buildings described are largely still extant; with their facings in mosaics and ceramic tiles they are among the most beautiful monuments of Islam.

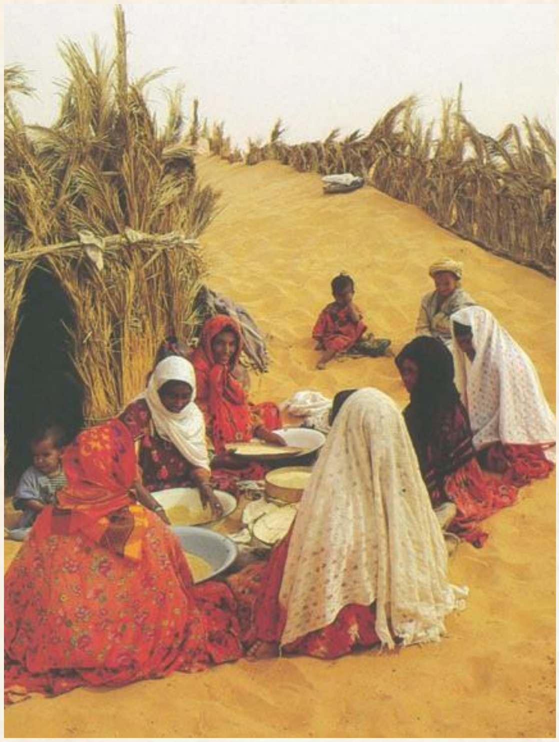
The renewal of Islamic art by the contribution of the nomads is a phenomenon which cannot really be explained except in terms of a certain predisposition of Muslim mentality. The fact is that Islam bears within itself and on the spiritual level the synthesis of two human attitudes, that of the sedentary and that of the nomad; the first chooses stability, which restricts him in space but allows him to count on the recurrent terms of time—he sows and reaps, dismantles and constructs—and the second chooses free movement in space, which places him, in a way, outside time and history, for nomadic life is not subject to transformation, remaining always at the point where it began. In the spiritual economy of Islam, the attitude of the sedentary establishes itself at a higher level as spiritual stability, while the attitude of the nomad establishes itself as non-attachment to ephemeral things. In a certain sense, it is urban life that is favored by Islam, because the town contains sanctuaries and it is in its midst that doctrinal knowledge and the



141. Tuareg camp in Niger



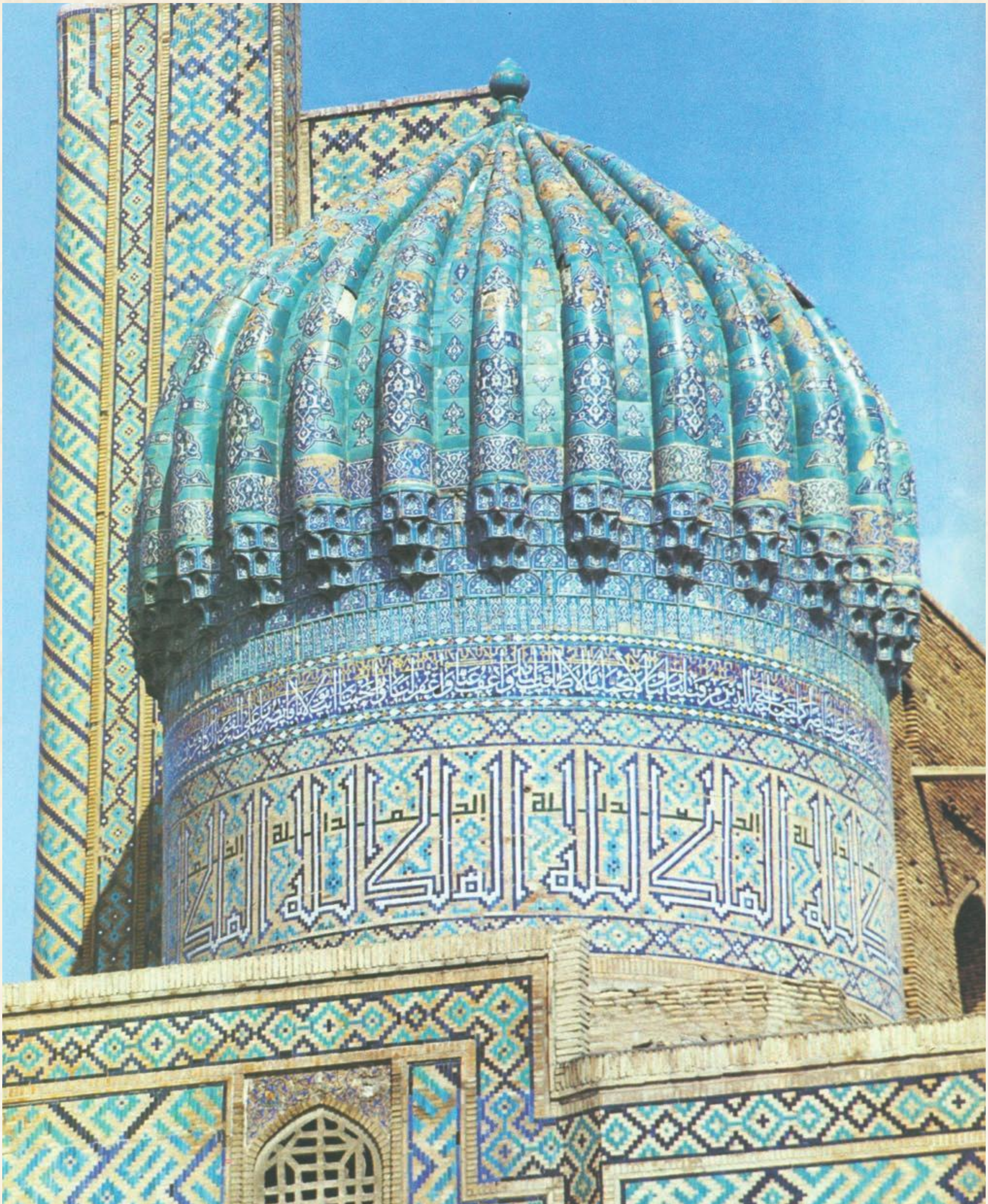
142. Summer camp of the Qashqāi nomads, Persia



143. Zénète Berbers, Grand Erg Occidental, Algeria



144. *Yurt* in Turkestan



145. Shir-Dor Madrasah, Samarqand, Uzbekistan, 1619-1636

usages or customs of the Prophet are handed down; in another sense, it makes the most of the positive qualities of the nomad, which are combativeness, dignity, and hospitality, to mention only the three fundamental virtues. If the sedentary knows the value of things, the nomad, for his part, is acutely conscious of their fragility, with an awareness that opens out onto the immediate present. Pushed to its limit, the present transcends the flow of time in such a way that there is a kind of contemplativity of the here-and-now in this spiritual attitude of the nomad, and this agrees very well, should the occasion arise, with the discriminatory role of the sword in the holy war.

The synthesis of nomadism and sedentarism is, moreover, prefigured in the role of Mecca as an urban center encompassed by the fluctuating Arab tribes. The existence of the sanctuary, together with the "truce of God" observed in its territory since pagan times, summarizes the true function of a city, which is to be an immutable and secure center, while pilgrimage towards this same center transposes nomadism into the spiritual order.

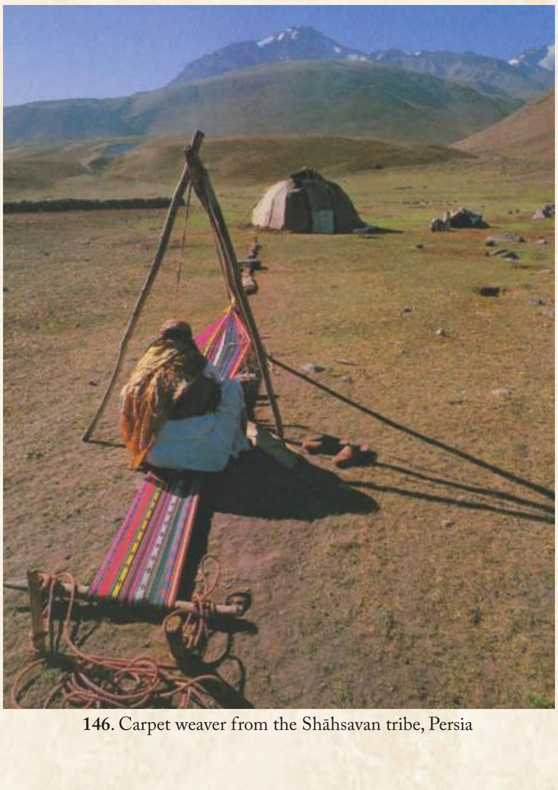
The normal relationship between nomadism and sedentarism resembles the Chinese *yin-yang* symbol ☯ in which the black section includes a white point, and the white section a black point. If the sedentary were, so to speak, self-contained, he would stifle unless he left a door open to nomadic life; and that is what, in fact, occurred in certain countries and civilizations as, for example, in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe, with all the well-known explosive reactions. Inversely, nomadism deprived of every element of spiritual stability finishes by destroying itself.

If we relate what we are saying to alchemy as the science of the animic world, then nomadism corresponds to *solve* and sedentarism to *coagula*; the two phases or movements must not preclude, but complete, each other.

It is in this sense that the seemingly contradictory assessments of Ibn Khaldūn are to be understood, when he condemns the nomads for their vandalism and holds up urban life as the sole guarantee of the arts and sciences and then, on the other hand, impugns city-dwellers for their leanings towards vulgarity and vice, contrasting these with the manliness and natural nobility of the Bedouins. The ideal is to live in a state of equilibrium between these two human elements. In this we have a far more profound concept than that of the universal *civitas*, the guiding image inherited from the Romans, which gave birth to the European "civilized ideal", with its exclusively civic proclivities which are hostile to nature.

2 The Art of the Carpet

The very fact that sedentarism and nomadism come together in the spirit of Islam makes it difficult to assign to each its part in their influence upon art. There are art forms which are sedentary by definition, such as all those which are associated with architecture. There is, nonetheless, a very widespread usage in Islamic



146. Carpet weaver from the Shāhsavan tribe, Persia

lands, which is to construct buildings rough and unadorned and afterwards to clothe them, in whole or in part, with a surface decoration of tile-mosaics, paneling, or stucco as if one were draping the walls with hangings; in a way, this comes quite close to nomad taste and, in any case, facilitates exchanges between the art of the city and that of the tent.

It is only right to mention, among the nomad arts, that of leatherwork, characterized by ornamentation in braided thongs; it is admittedly a very modest art, but it has its importance as the vehicle of certain motifs which reappear in fine art; we have in mind geometrical interlacements in particular.

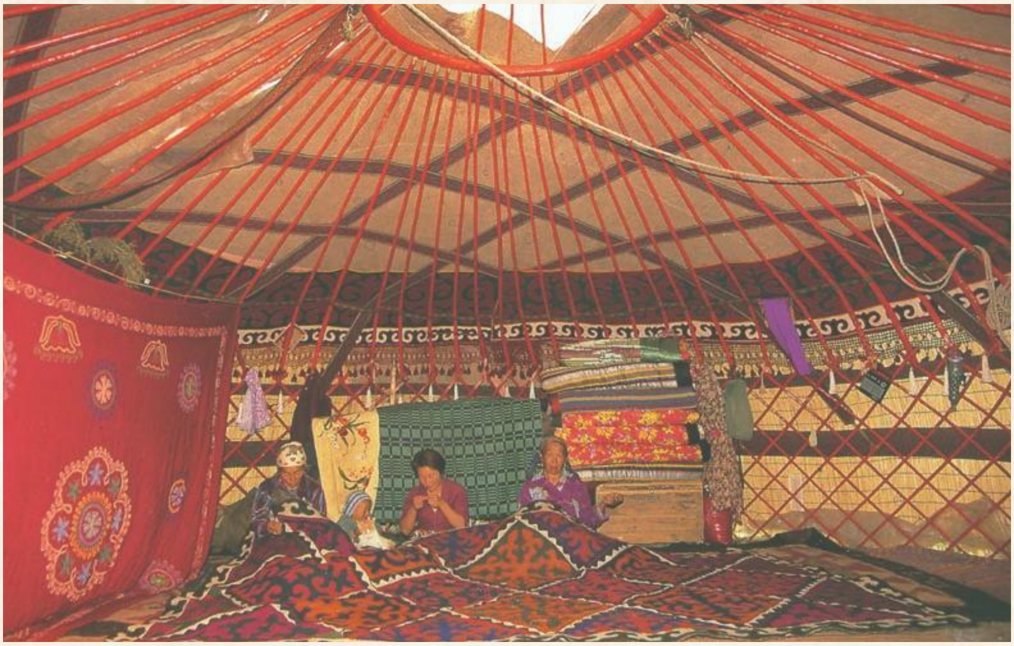
The art of metalwork cannot be purely nomadic, since its practice requires a certain stability; but it is often at the service of the nomads and therefore bears the stamp of their taste and genius. The nomad needs weapons, containers in metal, jewels for his women, and items of harness for his horse. From time out of memory, gold and silver mines have been found in nomad territory. But the most typically nomad art is without question that of the carpet and, above all, the knotted carpet, which we shall now discuss.

Let us first make clear that there exist two nomadic "cultures", both of which have a similar place in the Islamic sphere. These are the nomadic Turks and Mongols whose dwelling is the *yurt*, a round tent of wicker structure covered with felt, and the Arab, Iranian, and Berber nomads who live in the Bedouin tent that is made of woven goat's hair stretched on a kind of wooden yoke. The area of the *yurt* extends over the whole of Central Asia, whereas the black tent of the Bedouins is found from the Atlantic coast of North Africa to the Hindu Kush, where the two nomadic cultures meet but do not blend.

The "culture of the *yurt*" is indisputably richer in artistic expression than the "culture of the Bedouin tent", and this has led to a willingness to attribute to it the invention of the knotted carpet, which is the nomadic art *par excellence*. But the knotted carpet is also found among the Saharan Bedouins, and it is not known where its technique, which seems to be an imitation of animal fur, originated. It was assuredly not invented by the Seljuks, although it seems to have been with them, and more generally with the Turkish peoples, that the knotted carpet made its entry into the world of Islam and the Mediterranean basin. The life-time of carpets is not very long, and the originals have not survived but the representation of knotted carpets in Persian miniatures and European paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries bears witness to their diffusion. An indispensable item in the life of the nomads, it became the furnishing *par excellence* in Muslim households, and nothing could better illustrate the fundamental influence of nomadism upon Islamic civilization in its entirety.

Once adopted into urban surroundings, the normal carpet underwent a swift transformation in style, so that we have a copious range of "schools" extending from the Turcoman carpet, which is the purely nomad carpet of Central Asia, to the most exquisite products of the royal factories of Iran, Turkey, and Mughal India. But let us note that the Turcoman carpets we know today go back no further than the beginning of the nineteenth century; nomads do not keep their carpets; they use them and occasionally replace them with new ones, while remaining faithful to their eminently archaic designs, and this fidelity allows us to have some notion of what the original Turkish carpet was like. Let us say that its style is primitive without being primary, and that the very sobriety of its means of expression, used with a high degree of concentration, confers much nobility upon it.

These same qualities are also found in the carpet-making of the Saharan Bedouins. The basic artistic vocabulary is the same—purely geometrical motifs, repeated according to a symmetry that is both axial and diagonal. What complicates matters in the case of the Bedouin carpet from Africa is that it has absorbed cer-



147. Carpet weavers inside a *yurt* in Kyrgyzstan



148. Carpet weaver of the Qashqāi nomads, Persia

tain influences from urban Eastern and Anatolian carpets, which arrived in North Africa by the maritime trade route. Generally speaking, nomadic or Bedouin art happily assimilates shapes or designs from urban art by transposing them into its own archaic language. Thus a dual movement is involved; it is attracted on the one hand by the richer and more sumptuous art of the towns and, on the other, restores this same richness to its geometric and rhythmical elements, thus acting in the fashion of an alchemical "reduction".



149. Turcoman Saryk rug

Nothing in this domain is more unjust than to award all the laurels of art to Persian carpets from the great urban workshops and to treat the Turkish carpets of Anatolia and the Caucasus as the products of somewhat retarded provincial schools. In reality, the most beautiful Safavid carpets—and we are not speaking of the later Persian carpets made for the European market—are already bordering on the decadent to the extent that they borrow their means of expression, not from elements essentially and naturally inherent in the art of the carpet, but from painting. It is perhaps a truism to say that a carpet is not a piece of scenery but a floor-covering, but this does nonetheless express the situation, namely that decoration must match the nature of the object it enlivens; a carpet is a horizontal surface to be trodden underfoot and



150. Carpet with garden design from Persia, 17th century

touched with the hands; a simple division into fields of color serves to bring it joyously to life, whereas imagery woven out of three-dimensional appearances dispels its immediacy. If one accepts the criterion of the golden rule which requires the artist to use the minimum means to achieve the maximum aesthetic effect, then it is certainly not these Persian carpets, and even less the Ottoman court carpets, that carry the day, but rather certain relatively modest carpets from Anatolia and the Caucasus, which often represent a perfect synthesis of nomad and sedentary art.

Nomadic art has about it something indefinite and unvaried like the steppe; it prefers to express itself in simple or alternating repetitions of analogous design motifs, whereas sedentary art likes to create a collated and, in a way



151. West Anatolian rug, 19th century



152. East Anatolian rug, 19th century

architectural, order; it is happy to frame and mark off a central space occasionally enhanced by a medallion. The theme *par excellence* of the sedentary carpet is the garden, whose flowering plants are rendered with various degrees of stylization. This garden is quite naturally an image of the Koranic paradise, which is described as a "garden traversed by rivers". In certain cases, these rivers are represented on the carpet itself, which is then an image both of paradise and of a garden with a pool or water-course, as occurs in Persian architecture. In another sense, all Persian carpets seem to be derived from the legendary "carpet of springtime" which covered the floor of the immense throne-room at Ctesiphon, residence of the Sasanid Kings, and which the Prophet's companions divided among themselves by the sword and by virtue of the rights of war; this was perhaps vandalism, but it has none the less a profound significance, bearing in mind that this carpet was essentially an image of the earthly paradise.

Prayer-rugs are common to nomad and sedentary art. They can be recognized by their relatively small size and by their design, which represents the niche of the *miḥrāb* before which there often hangs a lamp, the *miḥrāb* being thus identified with the "niche of lights" of which the Koran speaks (see also Chapter V, 2).

But the most perfect carpets represent nothing in particular; they reflect the cosmos on their own level. We have before our eyes a carpet from Ushak in Anatolia. It has two main colors, wine-red and azure blue, and the entire play of art is unfolded between these two poles—the red, which is an active color being used as the background, and the azure, which is a passive and fugitive color, for the rosettes; this consolidates the background and forces the rosettes back into it. The rest are secondary colors—golden yellow to track the delicate arabesques and white to encircle the large rosettes, which makes the entire expanse radiant. These rosettes grow out of stars with eight points, like most of the decorations that typify the Turkish carpet, and at the same time they are elon-

gated in lines that follow the directions of the compass and in waves that flow back on themselves; they actualize the extension of space in the most complete manner possible, and their diadem contours are like a crystallization of this complex movement. The rosettes form an unbroken network, but each one arises from a center—from the center itself, the ubiquity of the center being one of the fundamental themes of Islamic art.

There are some sedentary carpets in purely geometrical style, such as the Mamluk carpets in turquoise green. Their ornamentations recall snowflakes or diamonds.

The carpets of Muslim Spain are of an analogous nature; they reflect the geometric decoration of Moorish architecture.

The Caucasian carpet holds a special position; it is very varied and very spontaneous, but draws upon a formal inheritance of great antiquity. The famous dragon carpets in particular, which are most thoroughgoingly Caucasian, recall the animal style of the Scythians and Sarmatians. Great mountain ranges like those of the Caucasus, Kurdistan, or the Atlas, play the role of cultural storehouses; their inhabitants are conservative like nomads, albeit in a different way; to remain themselves, nomads need to be in constant movement; thus, they are obliged to reduce their artistic impedimenta to what is essential. Mountain dwellers, on the other hand, find themselves in a somewhat insular situation; they gather treasures around them. Their souls are as if charged with a magical potency that makes ancient melodies ever new.

Let us conclude by mentioning the significance of the carpet in the esoteric symbolism of Islam. It is the image of a state of existence or simply of existence as such; all forms or happenings are woven into it and appear unified in one and the same continuity. Meanwhile, what really unifies the carpet, namely the warp, appears only on the borders. The threads of the warp are like the Divine Qualities underlying all existence; to pull them out from the carpet would mean the dissolution of all its forms.



153. Caucasian rug, 19th century



154. Baluchi prayer rug, Khorasan, Persia, c. 1875





155. Knotted woolen pile rug, Turkey, 16th century

3 Knightly Art

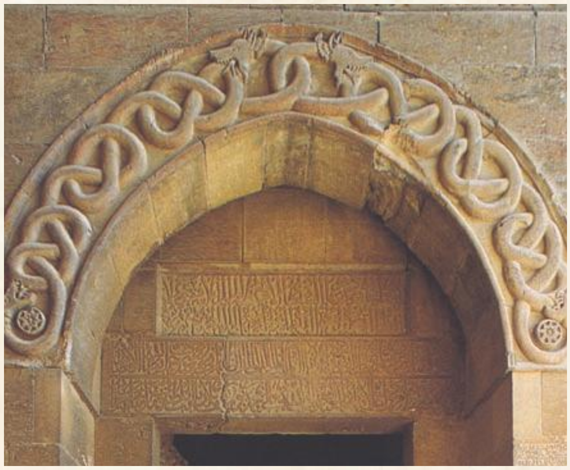
There is an affinity between nomadism and knighthood, an affinity of function in the first place, since the nomad conquerors generally form the warrior aristocracy of the subject peoples, and then, as it were, a deeper affinity of caste, because a true knight always has nomadic tendencies and a nomad appreciates the knightly virtues.

Let us make clear, even so, that there is no institution of castes in Islam, unless the rank held by the Prophet's descendants in the social order be so considered. But these descendants are not privileged with any temporal or spiritual function; they simply represent a virtual élite. If castes do not exist as institutions they do, nevertheless, exist as natural dispositions, and collective equilibrium can be realized only to the extent that these dispositions coincide with the actual functions of individuals. Now dispositions are necessarily related to heredity. This law is one which Islamic thought has never failed to acknowledge. The factual aristocracy has therefore always been recognized as such.

From another viewpoint, mediaeval Islam recognized orders of knighthood; it did so even before analogous orders had been established in the world of Christianity, since the Koranic law of holy war provides a framework for spiritual activity which puts the stress on heroism, nobility of soul, and self-denial, and the term *futuwwah*, which describes these knightly orders, covers all these significant qualities.

The orders of brotherhoods practicing *futuwwah* were recruited not only from among members of the dominant aristocracy but very often from craftsmens' or artists' guilds.

Here, then, we have a whole host of relationships, to which must be added the fact that knighthood, insofar as it is practiced by the dominant aristocracy, has links with life at the princely courts. Nomadism, knighthood, craftguilds, and the court: there cannot but be certain aspects of Islamic art that are placed within this constellation, and we will mention one that



156. Relief decoration representing two interlaced dragons at the entrance gate of Aleppo Citadel, Syria, 13th century



157. Detail of relief decoration on the west façade of the Great Mosque and Hospital of Divriği, Anatolia, Turkey, 13th century; the two-headed eagle was the emblem of the Seljuk dynasty

has its extension in the Christian West. We are referring to heraldry, which is manifestly a knightly art and includes, at the same time, certain nomadic elements, namely, animal symbolism—the two-headed eagle, for example, appeared for the first time in Seljuk art—and also allusions to hermeticism, which is one of the bases of the traditional cosmology taught in the *futuwwah* orders.

The meeting between nomadism and knighthood is especially apparent in Seljuk art—which is not at all surprising—and to a lesser degree in Mamluk art. The Seljuks no less than the Mamluks had, moreover, contacts with the Crusaders—often hostile but occasionally friendly—and it was in this way that many elements of Muslim knighthood were transmitted to the Christian peoples of the West. Knight-



Left to Right: **158**. Sword with a steel blade, cloisonné enamel decoration, and a hilt of silver gilt, Spain, Nasrid period, 15th century; **159**. Sword with a single-edged curved blade of watered steel with gold inlaid decoration and later gold damascening, Egypt, c. 1270 (blade) and Ottoman Turkey, c. 1520 (additional decoration); **160**. Sword with a single-edged curved blade of watered steel with gold damascening, and a hilt made of horn, Ottoman Turkey, 17th century



161. Part of a standard of pierced steel carrying a *sūrah* from the Koran, Persia, c. 17th century



162. A silver *kumia* dagger, Morocco, 19th century



163. Steel axe with gold inlay, made in Egypt or Syria, late 15th century

hood as a spiritual path is organically inherent in Islam; it emerges from Christianity only indirectly.

The high point of knightly art is, it need hardly be said, weaponry. It is here that vigor and precision, boldness and elegance, meet on the level of artistic expression. The best of this art is the fashioning of swords, the legendary model for which is the celebrated two-edged sword, *dhu ʾl-fiqār*, of ʿAlī, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet and the prototype in Islam of the perfect knight (*fatā*).

The blades of Muslim swords often bear brief inscriptions from the Koran, the most favored being the formula *lā ilāha illa ʾLlāh* ("There is no divinity except God"), a saying which itself represents the intellectual and spiritual sword which parts the ephemeral from the eternal or strikes down the error of confusing the relative with the absolute.



164. Turkish embroidered wicker shield of Mongolian style, 15th-16th century





Left: **165**. Turkish sword with inscription, steel blade, inlaid gold, and a hilt of wood, c. 1500; *Right*: 166. Ottoman helmet containing Koranic inscriptions around the rim and on the nose-guard, 16th century

Note to Chapter VI

1. See Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, *Historia del gran Tamerlan,* Sevilla, 1582.

Chapter VII
Synthesis

1 *Variety in Unity*

Islamic art embraces a whole range of styles, each of which is clearly distinguishable and corresponds to a specific ethnic environment, although no specific style could be described as being more or less "Islamic" than any other; this is an example of the phenomenon of diversity in unity, or of unity in diversity, and proves indirectly that Islam is not a synthesis invented by man.

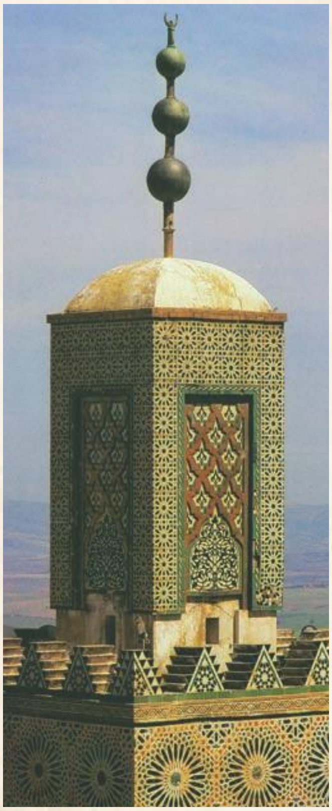
It is clear, moreover, that variety in styles expresses itself much more in the direction of breadth, or the co-existence of various ethnic milieux, than in that of historical development. There is, for instance, less difference between Persian art of the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, or between Maghribī art of the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries than there is between Maghribī and Persian art throughout the ages. This leads to the conclusion that the art of Islam has great integrative power but is, at the same time, of a static character, as is fitting in an art whose content is not the experience of phenomena but awareness of the timeless.

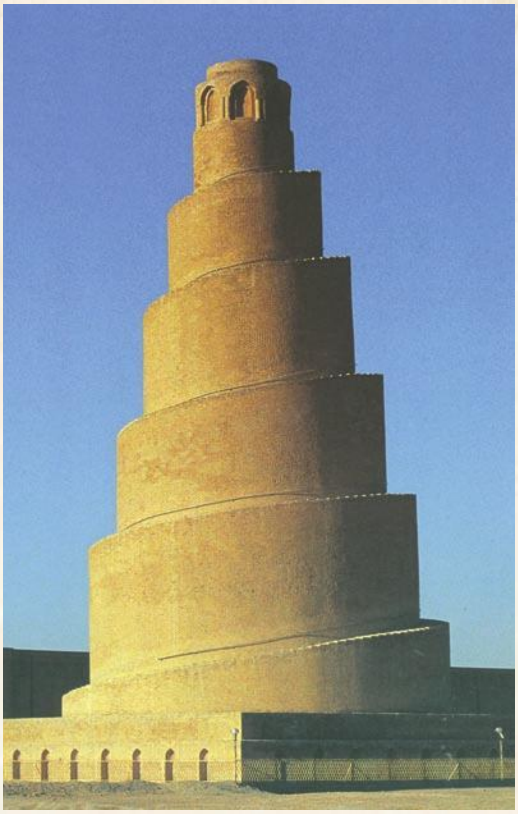
A sacred art's power of integration derives from the inexhaustible nature of its object or ideal; in fact, there is no possible form that could express the spiritual ideal of Islam exhaustively. Even so, there must exist in any ethnic environment or at any level of forms a best possible way of expressing this ideal. Once this has been found—and the artist who hits upon it is like the Zen archer who hits the mark blindfolded—there is no need to look any further; henceforward, the mastery of the art will rest upon the exact and imaginative application of the "formula" to each particular case.

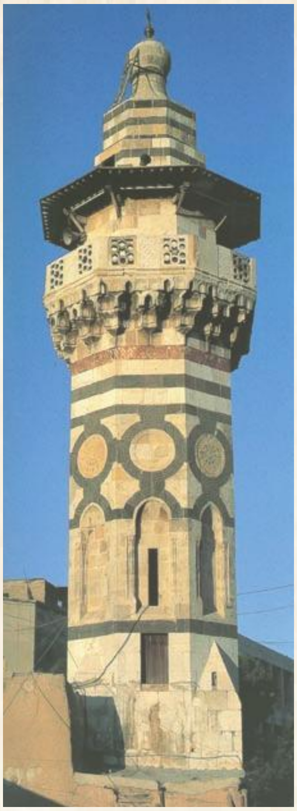
The love of "formulae", that is, of formal syntheses which are both concise and rich in possibilities, is characteristic of every sacred art. Buddhist iconography is made up of type images of this kind, and the same is true of Hindu and Taoist art, as well as of the icons of the Eastern Church, whose coloring and composition are fixed by tradition. In each case the imagination of the individual artist is subordinated to the traditional model; his imagination is free only in an inward sense in that he endeavors to attain to the spiritual kernel of his model and to remake the image from that. In the case of Islam, it is in architecture and ornamentation that one must look for the formulae or prototypes which the artist ceaselessly reproduces and varies according to circumstance. These prototypes are inexhaustible because they are true.

This fidelity to models, which religion does not actually prescribe but which the consensus of believers has in a sense consecrated, has earned for Islamic art the stigma of being the victim of "stagnation", as if its stability over the centuries had been the result of inertia or lack of awareness. In reality, the alternatives of creativity or stagnation are highly inapplicable to sacred art, which is either faithful to its principles, and hence active and aware, or forgetful of them, thus entailing decadence and collapse.

The prism which causes the single beam of Islamic art to be multifariously colored and refracted can be termed the collective soul. This is defined by a whole gamut of racial, linguistic, geographical, and historical factors which have, nonetheless, no qualitative effect upon art when each is taken singly and apart. It is simply as elements of a synthesis or on a level belonging to the soul that such factors as race and language, or even topography and craftsmanship, come together to form a particular style.

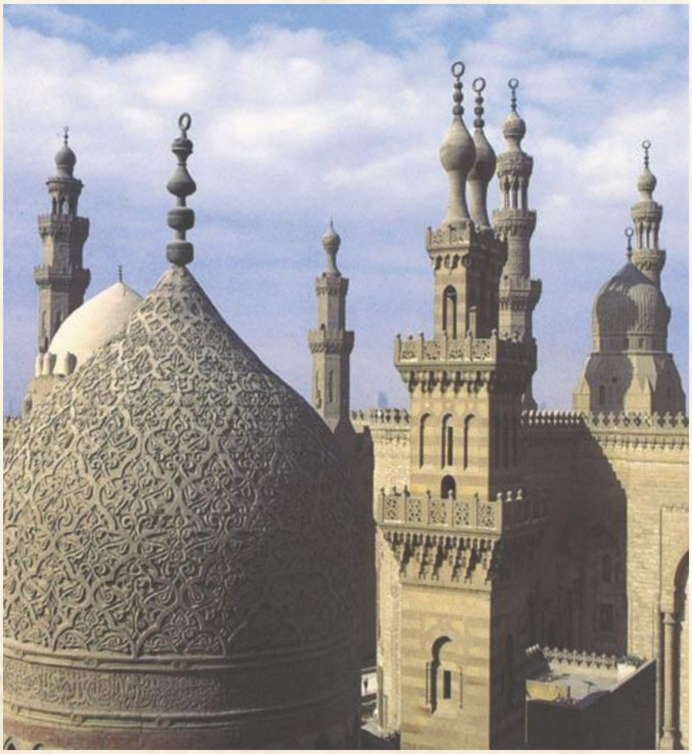






Left: **167**. Sidi Halaoui minaret in Tlemcen, Morocco; *Center*: **168**. Minaret of the Mutawakkil Mosque, Sāmārra, Iraq; *Right*: **169**. Minaret of al-Sibāʿiyya Madrasah, Damascus, Syria

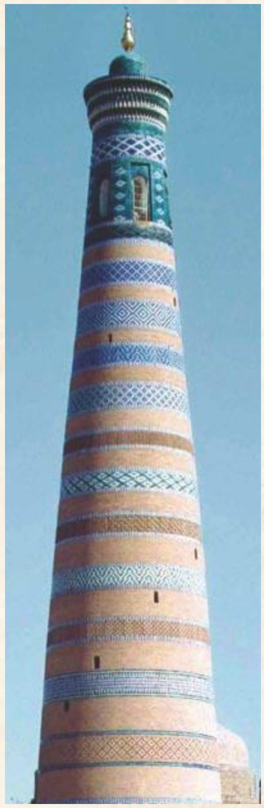




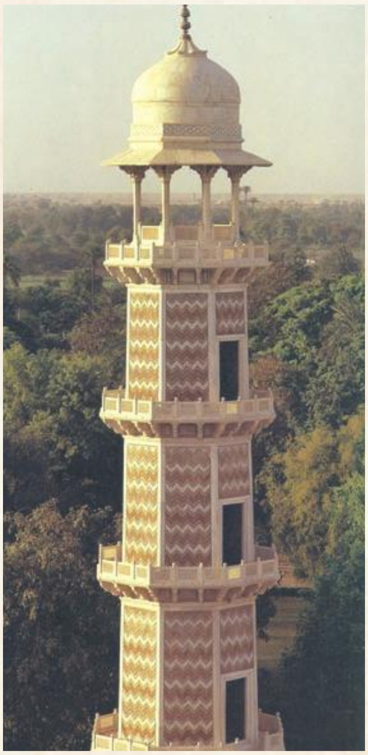


Left: **170**. Yivli (fluted) minaret, Antalya, Turkey, 1219-1238; *Center*: **171**. Minarets of the Sultan Ḥasan and Rifaʾi Mosques, Cairo, Egypt; *Right*: **172**. Minaret of Sultan Süleymān Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey, 1520-1556



Left: **173**. Minaret of the Mosque of Arwā bint Aḥmad, Jiblah, Yemen, 1088-1089; *Center left*: **174**. Sarābān minaret, Iṣfahān, Persia, 14th century; *Center right*: **175**. One of the twin minarets of the Shāh Mosque of Iṣfahān, Persia; *Right*: **176**. Minaret of the Madrasah of Islam Khodja, Khīva, Uzbekistan





Left: **177**. Minaret of the Jahāngīr shrine, Lahore, Pakistan, 17th century; *Center*: **178**. The Quṭub Minār, Delhi, India, 12th century; *Right*: **179**. Minaret of the Tomb of Iʿtimād ad-Daula, Agra, India, 17th century

It is not possible, within the framework of this study, to describe the entire field of Islamic art with its various ramifications, and certainly not to follow its flowering step by step. We shall limit ourselves to describing some comparative examples of architecture, each of which may be considered as the synthesis of a different style.

2 The Great Mosque of Kairouan

The foundation of the great mosque of Kairouan goes back to ʿUqbah ibn Nāfiʿ, a Companion of the Prophet and the conqueror of North Africa, and it is therefore one of the oldest mosques in existence and the first of all the mosques in the Maghrib, the Muslim West. Several times rebuilt, its present form is no earlier than 836 A.D., but the very sobriety of its style, linked to a masterly use of space, is evocative of the first lightning expansion of Islam. The very extensive prayer-hall, with a flat roof supported by arcades, opens out on to a vast courtyard as if to welcome an entire host of fighters for the faith. This courtyard extends lengthwise along the axis of the *miḥrāb*, and this axis is strongly emphasized on one side by the central nave of the oratory, which is constructed at a higher level and adorned with a dome at each end, and on the other side by the imposing minaret, a kind of three-stepped donjon, which is perhaps the most ancient of all surviving minarets.

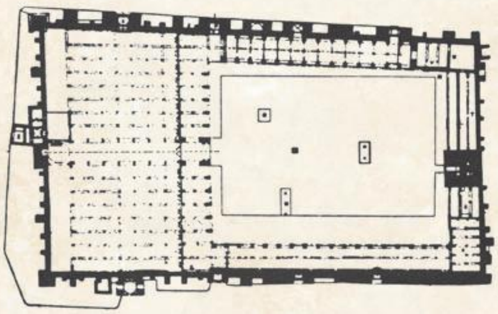
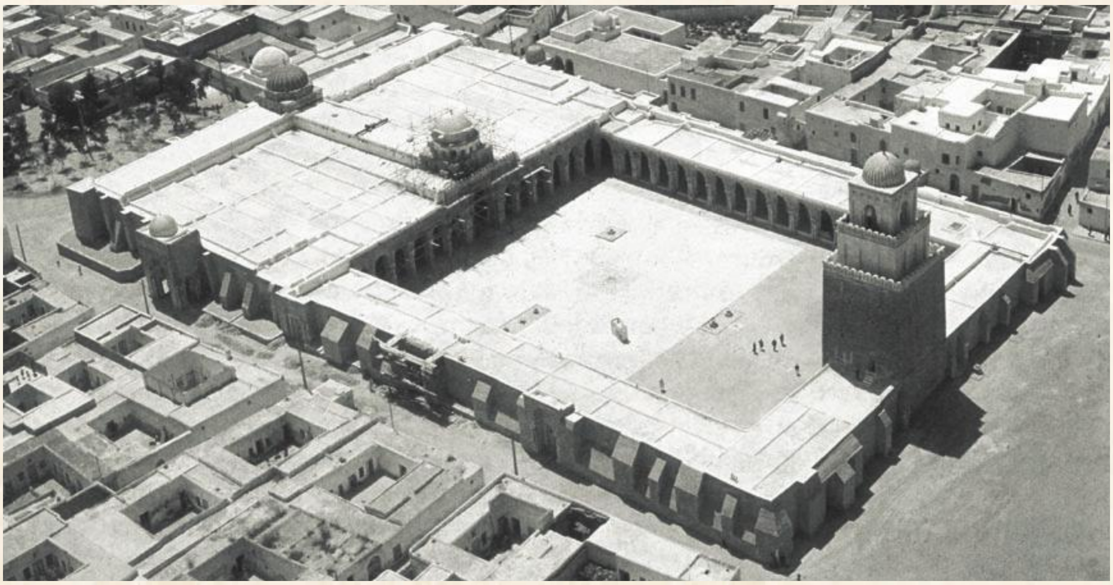
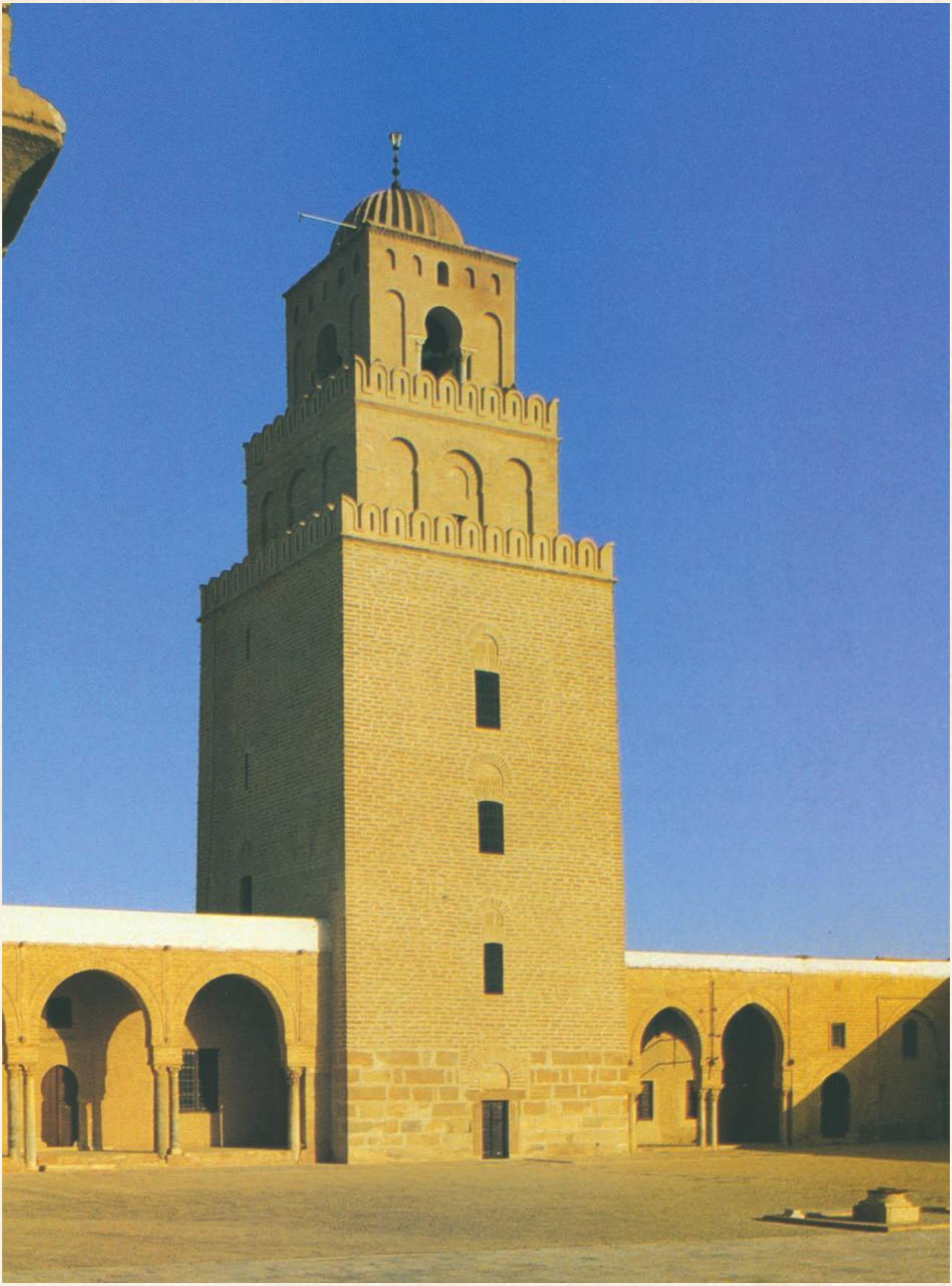


Figure 40: Plan of the Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia

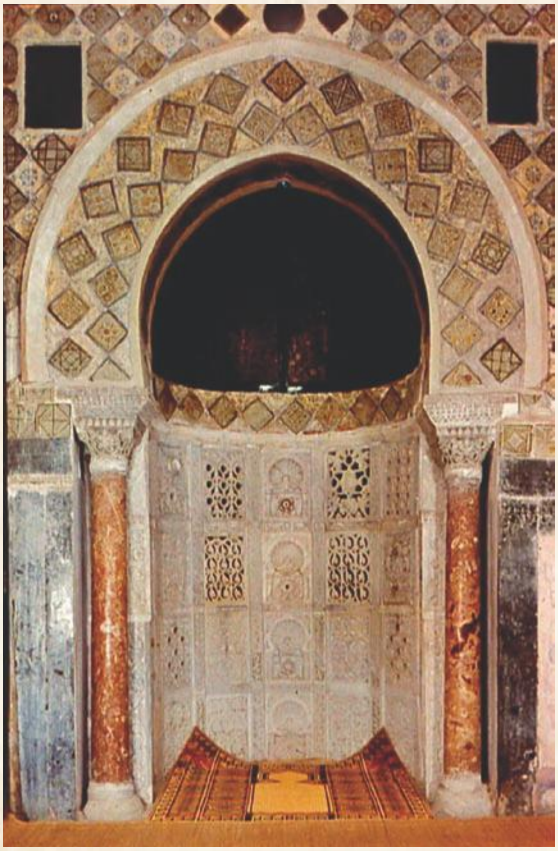
The arcades of the prayer-hall are arrayed in depth and not parallel to the wall of the *qiblah* as they are in the Umayyad mosque of Damascus. But their progress is interrupted at various points by arcades which cut frontally across them. However, one span which is broader than the others along the wall of the *qiblah* comes together with the central nave in the shape of a letter T, and this was to be typical of mosques of this family, and answers, moreover, to the requirements of the liturgy. Seen from above, an assembly of worshippers at prayer in an open space has the shape of a bird with outspread wings; the bird's head is the



180. Aerial view of the Great Mosque of Kairouan



181. Northern side of the courtyard with the minaret of the Great Mosque of Kairouan



182. The *miḥrāb* of the Great Mosque of Kairouan, 9th century



183. Kūfī inscription on a column of the Great Mosque of Kairouan

imām who leads the prayers; and the first ranks behind him, which extend most broadly—there being a certain merit in praying directly behind the *imām*—are the quill-feathers of its wings, whose contours then retract gradually in the direction of the tail formed by the late arrivals, who group themselves along the axis of the *miḥrāb*. This shape fits easily into the plan of the oratory.

Kairouan is situated in a great plain, and the vast courtyard of the mosque reflects the natural surroundings. The oratory's flat roofs and the porticos surrounding the courtyard, as well as the domes and the heavy enclosing walls, are whitened with lime, and this itself, although it is only on the surface and is not very durable, does contribute greatly to the appearance of the sanctuary which the white light falling from the sky envelops with a peace that is both sepulchral and serene.

Inside the mosque, the whiteness of the walls is made mellow by the spreading of honey-colored mats. Large, conically-tiered chandeliers are hung between the arcades. These are reminiscent of the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus and, beyond that, of Byzantine architecture, but already suggest typical Maghribī art, far removed from Rome in their supple outlines.

The *miḥrāb* of the great Mosque of Kairouan is one of the most ancient known. It dates from 862-863 A.D. and has the shape of a perfectly concave niche, flanked by two columns, which support a projecting arch. This arch and the surrounding wall are liberally adorned in ceramic tiles embellished with metallic glaze. The walls of the niche are covered with sculptured marble panels forming a trellis beyond which the presence of the background wall can be felt; for pilgrims visiting this famous mosque, this decoration conceals the original *miḥrāb* before which ʿUqbah ibn Nāfiʿ, the venerated Companion of the Prophet, used to pray.

The vault of the *miḥrāb* is ornamented with a stylized vine, painted in gold on a black ground. It recalls the famous façade of Mshattā

Facing Page: **184.** Partial view of the prayer hall of the Great Mosque of Kairouan, 9th century



and is linked, like the latter, with the ancient symbolism of the vine as the image of the Logos and as the world-tree.

3 *The Great Mosque of Córdoba*

The great mosque of Córdoba represents perhaps the most purely Arab of all architecture, and this is clearly due to the relative isolation of Muslim Spain and to the intention of its founder ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān I who took pride in proclaiming the Arab and Quraishite origin of his house. Himself an Umayyad prince, he was able to survive the massacre of his family by the Abbasids and to establish his kingdom in Spain. For these very reasons, the mosque he built in 785 A.D. is a kind of counterpart to the Great Mosque of Damascus and the logical outcome of its main architectural themes.

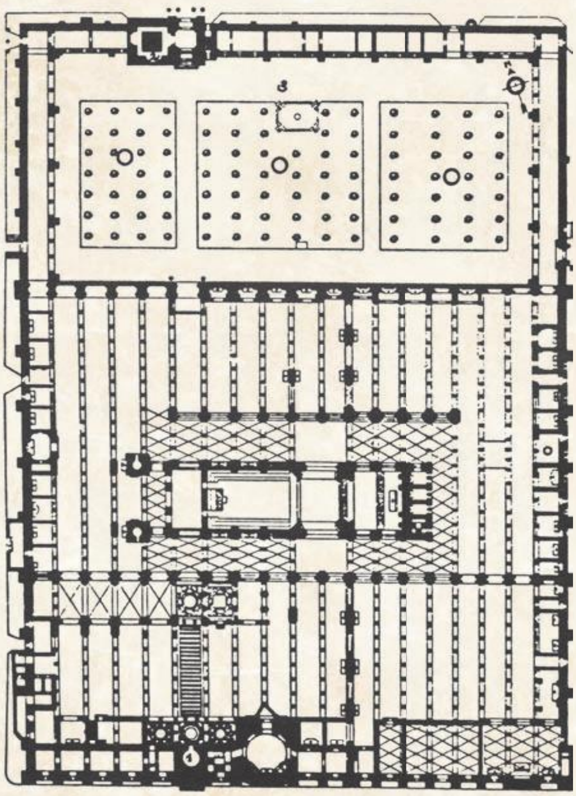


Figure 41: Plan of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, Spain

On the model of the Damascus mosque, that of Córdoba includes a courtyard and a prayer-hall whose long roofs with a double slope are supported by arcades on two levels, with the difference, however, that the upper arcades no longer suggest, as they do at Damascus, the walls of a basilical nave with skylights. At Córdoba, the lower and upper arcades are no longer part of a wall, but are reduced to their pillars and arches without any intermediate masonry. The upper arches, which support the roof, rest upon the same pillars as the lower arches or the transom arches. Let us say, to give a better picture of the image evoked by this architecture, that the curves of both series of arches soar like palm-fronds from the same trunk or pillar, which, for its own part, rests upon a relatively slender column, with no feeling, even so, of being too heavy for it, since the arches with their many-colored and fan-shaped wedge-stones have such expansive strength that they dispel any suggestion of weight.

The secret of this illusion—although it is no illusion in fact, but the expression in static terms of a reality which goes beyond the material plane—is that not all the arches have the same outline. The lower ones are drawn out beyond the shape of a pure semicircle, whereas the upper ones are more open and purely semicircular. Thus it is that space itself seems to be breathing and to expand outwards from an omnipresent center.

The categories of European aesthetics retire discomfited in the face of such architecture; is not architectural space conditioned by its boundaries? Is it not simply a container whose form, whether large or confined, or extended in one direction or another, determines the content? In the mosque of Córdoba the limits of space play no role at all; the walls of the prayer-hall disappear beyond a forest of arcades. Their sheer repetition—there were 110 in the primitive mosque and more than 400 after it was enlarged in the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries A.D.—gives an impression of endless extension. Space is qualified here not by its bound-



185. Interior of the Great Mosque of Córdoba. Area in front of the *miḥrāb*

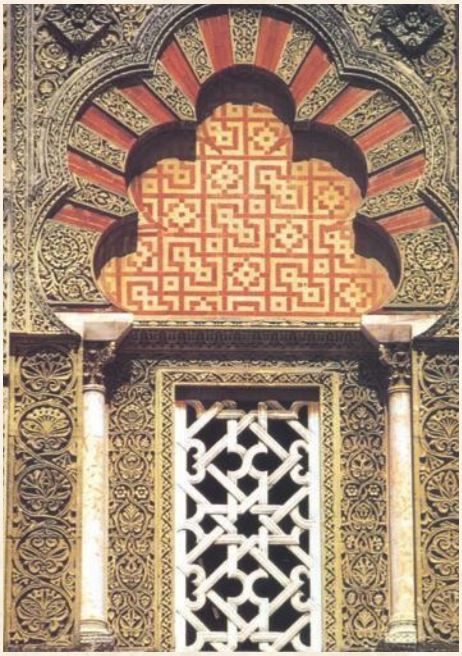




aries but by the movement of the arcades, if one may describe as movement this expansion which is both powerful and immobile.

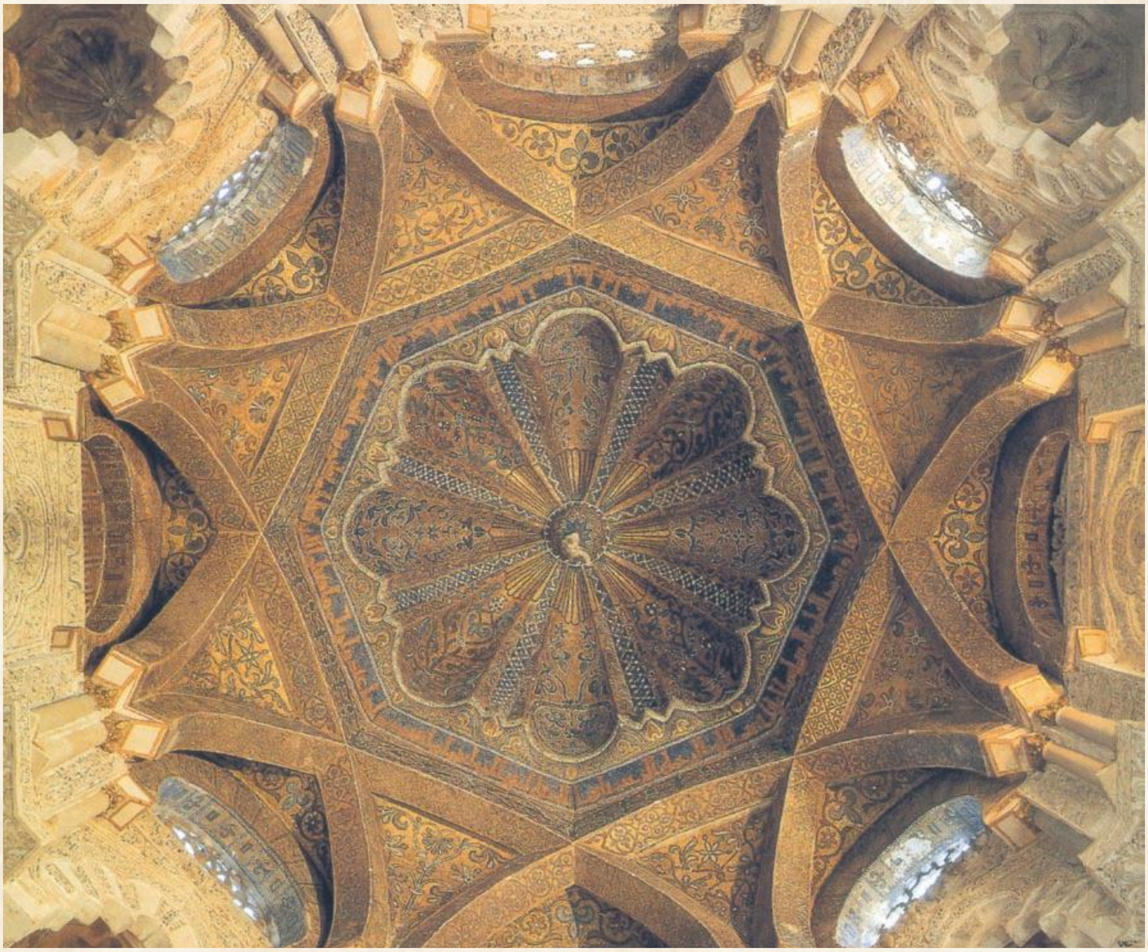
The same considerations apply in the static order. According to the rules of classical European architecture, a building's supports must be proportionate to the weight they bear, the definitive criterion being our own organic feeling for things; in other words, architectural statics must imitate those of the human body. For Córdoban architecture—and, more generally for all Islamic architecture—this rule does not work; this is a logical art, objectively static but never anthropomorphic.

The practical problem faced by the unknown architect of the Córdoba mosque was the following: to raise the roof of the oratory to a height proportionate to the extent of the building, the antique columns, or the building-spoils which were available, were insufficient. It was therefore necessary to supplement them, and the example of Damascus suggested arcades on two levels. These were then reduced to their inner frames lest they should crush the columns. Such are probably the purely technical data which the architect had somehow to make



187. Detail of the exterior of the Great Mosque of Córdoba

Opposite: **186.** Interior of the prayer hall of the Great Mosque of Córdoba



188. Dome on interlacing ribs in front of the *miḥrāb* in the Great Mosque of Córdoba

the best of. The solution he presents is a victory over the weight and inertia of stone.

The mosque at Córdoba was steadily enlarged over three centuries without its architectural scheme being altered. To correct the impression made by its present state, one must discount in the mind's eye not only the somber, half-Gothic, half-Baroque church built in the very midst of the forest of arcades but also the vaults which have replaced, in practically all the transoms, the ceiling of beams adorned with paintings. The polychrome of the arches, the wedge-stones of which alternate between white stone and red brick, was brought out by the gilding of the capitals. Perforated metal lamps were hung in all the naves and the floor was doubtless covered with carpets.

Let us point out that the structure of this mosque depends, in sum, on forms that can be delineated without perspective; it is, in a way, composed of arabesques. This two-dimensional character of the forms is even more accentuated in those parts of the building which al-Ḥakam II built between the years 961 and 966 A.D., taking particular pains with the decoration. It is to him that we owe the marvelous *miḥrāb*, as well as the various vaults or cupolas which stand before it, including their substructures, which consist of interlacing arcades.

These cupolas, the construction of which has no known precedent, on the one hand anticipate Gothic vaulting, since they are rib-tiered, and, on the other hand, prefigure Persian vaulting by the fact that the ribs do not join up at the



189. *Miḥrāb* of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, crowned by horseshoe arch

cupola's summit but cross over in the shape of a star-shaped polygon, leaving the central crown uncovered.

To support the cupolas, the regular order of the columns was split, and the resulting arches were interlaced in designs as rich as they are unexpected. There is perhaps no more striking instance in Muslim architecture of that marriage of static and rhythmic forms which is so profoundly congenial to the Islamic spirit.

But the masterpiece of Córdoban art is the *miḥrāb*; its composition came to be one of the formulae to which the artists of the Maghrib returned without cease, not to copy them in servile or mechanical fashion but to interpret them in the best possible way and to adapt them to circumstances.

The niche of this *miḥrāb*, which is very deep and on a polygonal plane, is surrounded in its upper part by a horseshoe arch, very large and radiating outwards with wedge-stones decorated in yellow, green, and rust-red mosaics; this, in its turn, is contained within a rectangular framework on which are traced letters in severe Kūfī script of gold on an azure ground. This arch and its framework were to become henceforward inseparable, for they fulfill one another and provide a mutual equilibrium like joyful expansiveness tempered by the "sense of eternity", or like fervor and justice, or love and wisdom.

4 The Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn at Cairo

The mosque built between 876 and 879 A.D. by Ibn Ṭūlūn, a Turkish governor in the service of the Abbasids, belongs to a world ethnically and geographically very different from the Maghrib. It is the descendant of the great mosques, now destroyed, built by the Caliphs in Mesopotamia where the art of building derived not from the Byzantines but from Persia, and where the working material of the mason was not stone but clay formed into raw or baked brick. Instead of stone columns, as used by Syrian and Maghribī architects, and most often acquired from despoiled Roman buildings, brick pillars were erected to support peristyle mosque roofs. It is not only the building technique that is different; the aesthetic sensibility is equally at variance. Nevertheless, we shall see that the concept of space is essentially the same in both.

The Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn has a very large courtyard which is practically square and which can be said to be built all the way round it, since the porticos which environ it are two galleries deep and the prayer-hall is no more than five. What is more, the arcades which support the flat roofs all face towards the courtyard, which is to say that they stand parallel to the courtyard's four walls. What makes this arrangement imposing is, moreover, the fact that the arcades with their massive pillars present themselves as a continuous wall into which doors with ogival arches have been cut; more exactly speaking, it is a series of pillars and a series of doors, the volume of the walls and the space they circumscribe being in perfect balance and mutually

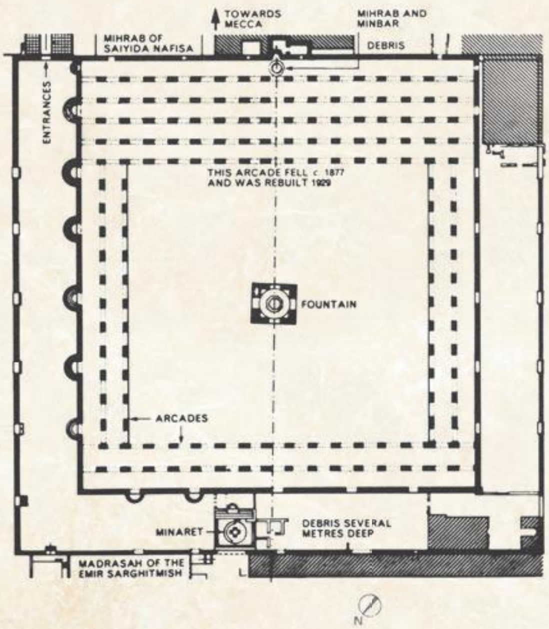
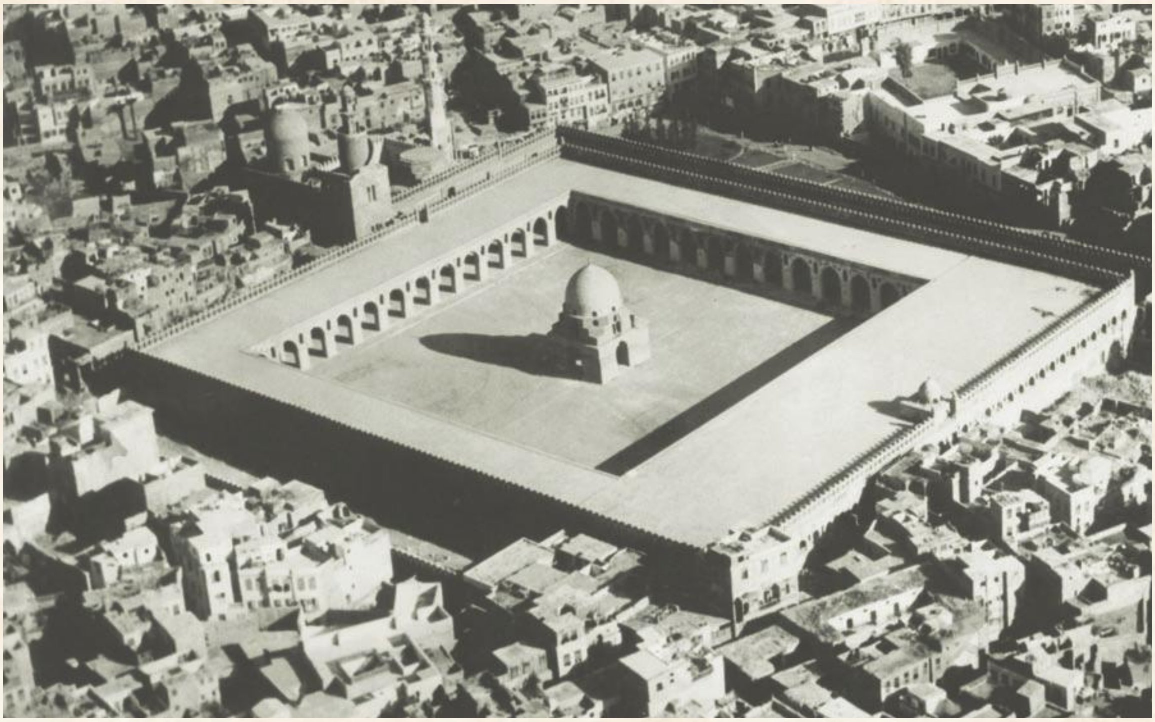


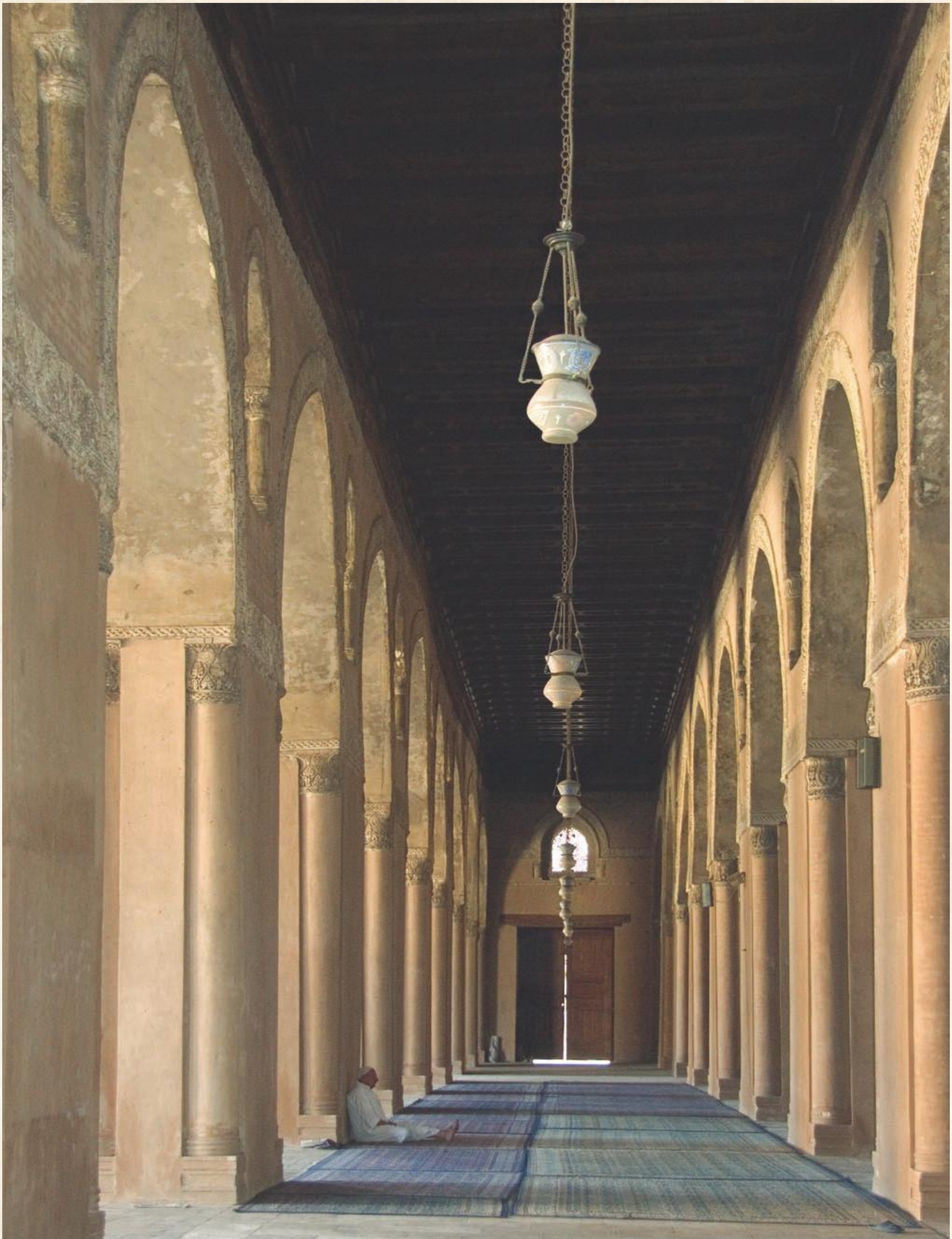
Figure 42: Plan of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn, Cairo, Egypt



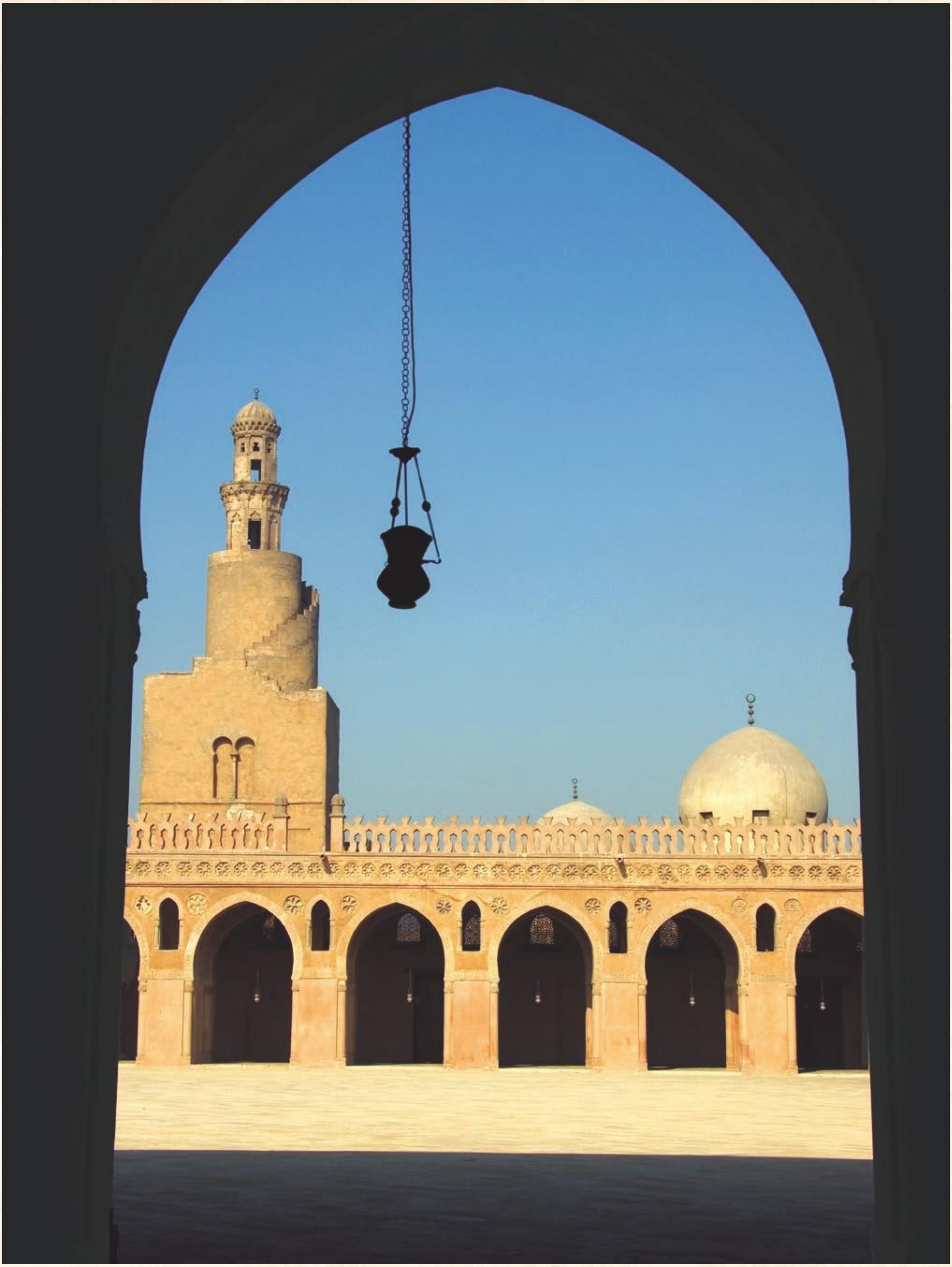
190. Aerial view of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn



191. Courtyard of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn, with the dome over the ablution fountain and the minaret on the north-west side



192. South-east arcade of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn



193. The minaret of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn seen through the south-eastern arcades



complementary, and this is accentuated by the windows set between the arches and along the axis of each pillar; they make the arcades into a screen in which positive and negative, filled space and emptiness, are all brought into play.

Despite this, the pillars have a certain full-bodied quality which is further emphasized by the columns locking into their four angles. Ornamental friezes in carved plaster enclose the profiles of arches and windows; these are no more than delicate chasing along the edges of the constructed mass, but they are enough to bestow upon it the quality of a precious material.

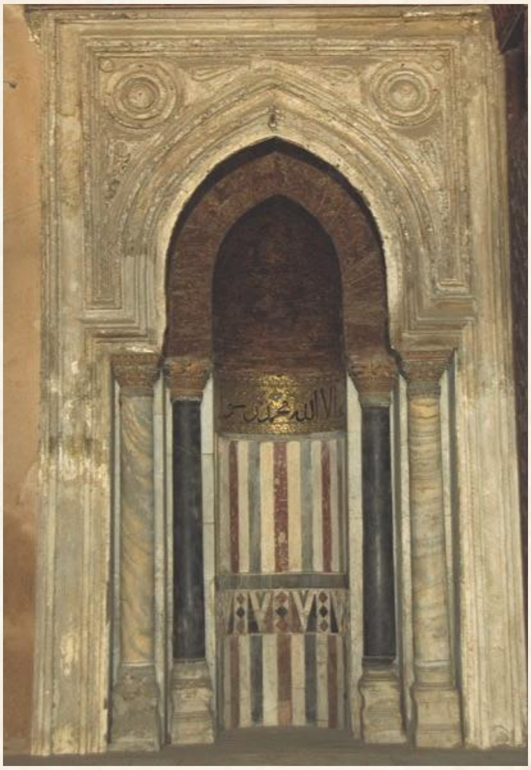
In the middle of the court there rises a cubical edifice with four doors which is surmounted by a dome. This construction, which is far more recent than the mosque and dates only from the end of the thirteenth century, shelters the ablution fountain. The fountain was originally covered with a pavilion, the gilded dome of which was held up by columns.

The Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn has a walled outer sanctuary holding it apart from the neighboring buildings. It is in this sanctuary, on the side opposite to that of the *miḥrāb*, that the minaret stands, composed of several storeys or levels, square at the base and round on top, with an outer staircase ascending in spirals towards the Mamluk watchtower which crowns the ancient structure, recalling the "entwined" minarets (*malwiyyah*) of Baghdad and, ultimately, the *ziggurats* of Mesopotamia.

The outer walls of the mosque have a very particular kind of crenellation forming a skyline and taking up, in a continuous arabesque, the theme of the screen with complementary empty and filled spaces. It is impossible to tell whether this skyline imposes itself upon the heavens or whether it is heaven that transpierces and enfolds it with its tongues of fire.



Opposite and Above: **194-195**. Detail of the arcades of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn



196. Main *miḥrāb* of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn



197. Stucco *miḥrāb* of al-Afḍal in the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn, 1094



198. The minaret of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn



199. Dome above the ablution fountain of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn



200. The crenellated walls of the Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn

5 *The College Mosque of Sultan Ḥasan in Cairo*

In all the countries of Islam and at all periods, but particularly after the advent of the Turkish peoples, monarchs have built architectural complexes, called *kulliyāt*, which always included a mosque, often a college or *madrasah*, occasionally a hospital or *māristān*, and more rarely a dervish lodge or *khānaqāh*. The founder of the complex was happy to add to it a mausoleum for himself, in full confidence that the beneficiaries of his work would show their gratitude by praying for his soul.

In Central Asia, these complexes frequently assume the aspect of citadels of the faith dominating the vast spaces of the steppes. The Mamluk sultans imitated them by bringing the various components of a complex into a single building comparable to a fortress, from which there emerge the minarets of the mosque and the dome which shelters the tomb of the founding prince. The College Mosque of Sultan Ḥasan in Cairo, founded in 1361 A.D., is a classic example of this. It comprises four great vaulted rooms, which, opening out onto an inner court, serve both as oratories and auditoriums, a like number of colleges and their dwelling quarters and, finally, the sultan's mausoleum.

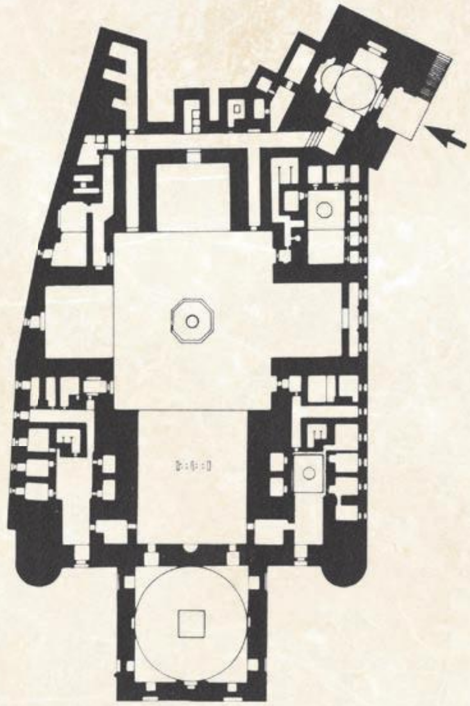
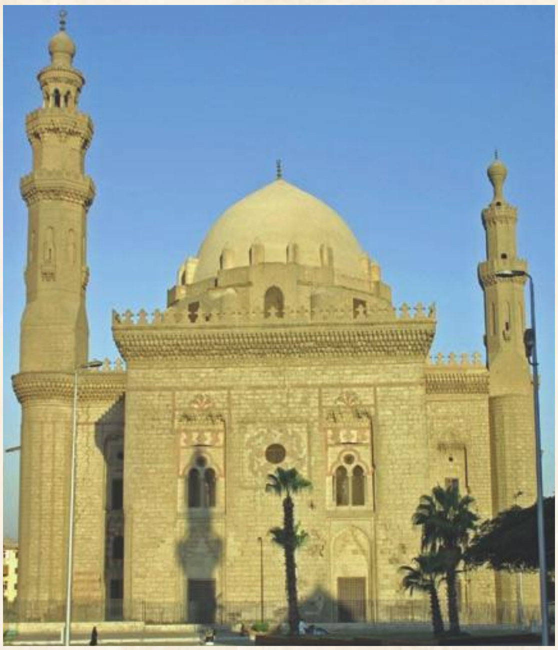


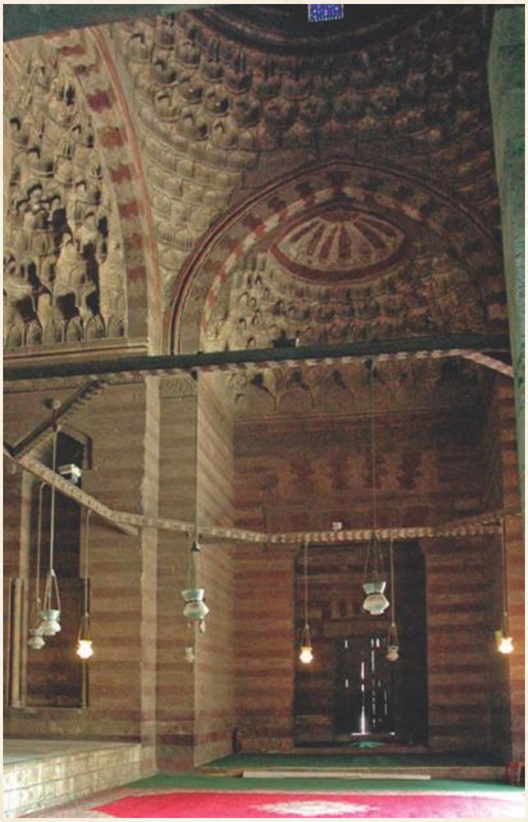
Figure 43: Plan of the Sultan Ḥasan Mosque, Cairo, Egypt
Opposite: **202.** The "stalactite" portal of the north-eastern façade of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque



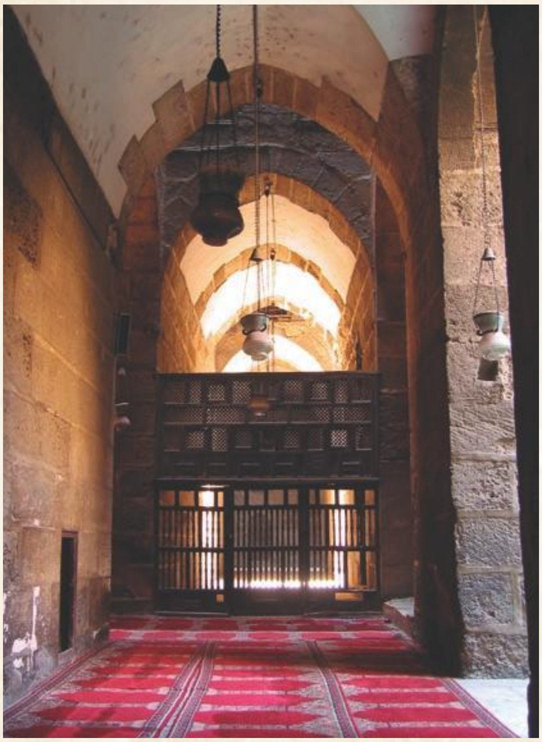
201. The south-eastern side of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque

To give some idea of the colossal proportions of this building, the principal dimensions are 150 meters in length and 68 meters at its broadest point. It is a rectangular block with its longitudinal axis corresponding to the *qiblah*. The interior arrangement of the building shows this alignment distinctly, whereas the outer contours are somewhat irregular, perhaps because of the position of old buildings in the vicinity, and there is in particular a veering away from the directional axis at the northern corner of the complex. The artist was able to take advantage of this to join up with the great eastern façade which guides visitors or pilgrims to the gateway. At the end of this façade, which is enlivened by no more than narrow, upright grooves, where the windows are inset, the wall





203. Vestibule of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque



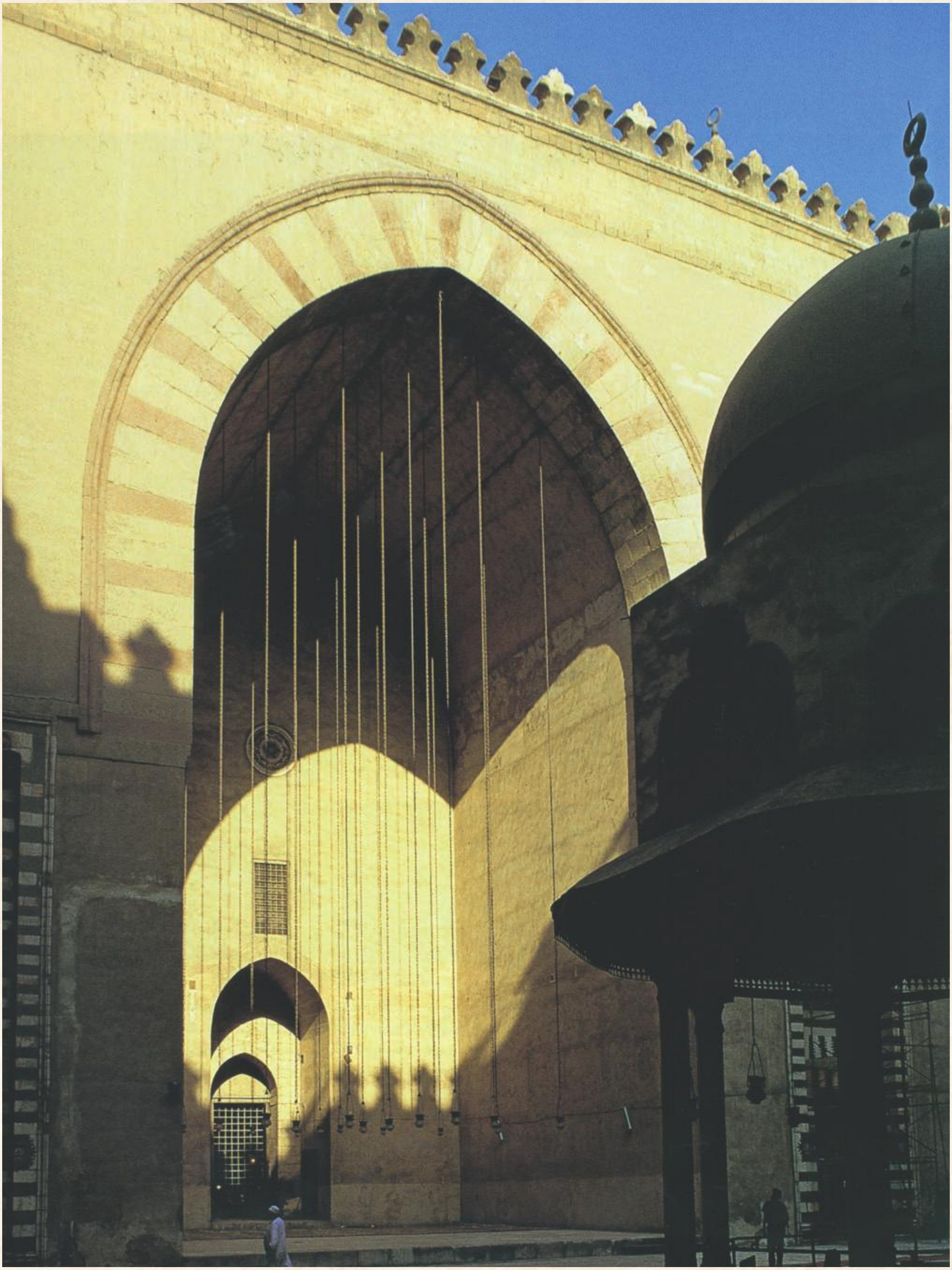
204. Corridor from vestibule to the interior of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque

folds back at a moderate angle and presents a tall gateway in the shape of a niche hollowed in the stone. This niche, which is broad at its base as far as the level of the lintel and then becomes increasingly narrow towards the top, discloses a whole cavern of *muqarnas*, as if the building's interior—its flesh and bone—were made of crystal. On both sides of the gateway, immediately reminiscent of certain Seljuk gateways of Asia Minor, are bands of delicately carved ornamentation and rectangular areas in bas-relief forming a framework which, halfway up the wall, is interrupted by the very unexpected motif of an interlacement in the form of a swirling swastika. This motif is found not only on Seljuk gateways but also on analogous Timurid and Safavid monuments, and one wonders whether it may not well perpetuate a very ancient sun symbol linked to the idea of the solstice as the gateway of heaven…

On stepping across the threshold, one realizes that the gateway niche is no more than a frontispiece to a sort of antechamber or atrium roofed by a lofty, conical vault composed of *muqarnas* honeycombs and illuminated by a lantern-tower.

Two high and fairly narrow corridors lead from this atrium by an angular path to the great inner court. There would be some temptation to compare these corridors to those found in certain funerary monuments of ancient Egypt if there did not exist a closer model in the Arab house with its staggered lobby which shields the inner court from the gaze of the curious. The contrast between the dark entrance passage and the brightly lit point where it opens onto the court is here, as in the Arab house, very great, particularly as in this case the courtyard of the Sultan Ḥasan mosque forms a great, cubic well of light surrounded by the deep and shadowed recesses of the four oratories. These are disposed in the form of a Latin cross and their simple vaults emerge onto the four sides of the court in large and vigorous ogival arches.

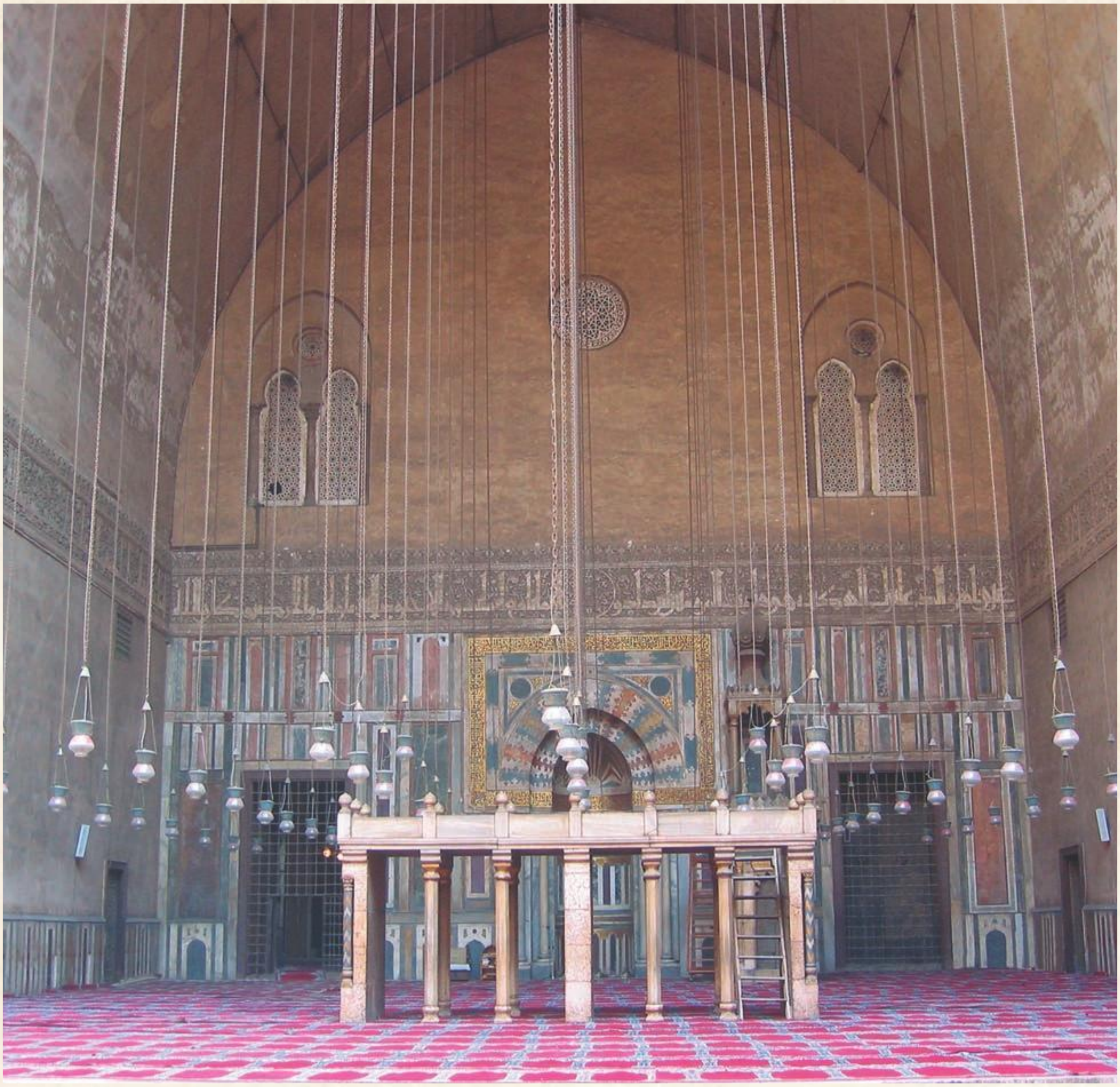
This arrangement leads ideally to a variation on the theme of the cube: if a cube is



205. Partial view of the courtyard and the ablution fountain of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque, seen from the south-eastern *īwān*



206. The ablution fountain of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque



207. The south-eastern *īwān* of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque

divided symmetrically (2:2:2) it becomes eight lesser cubes which, when they are arranged in a square, mark off a ninth at the center which is empty; this, then, is the courtyard, and the four cubes which form a cross are the halls opening out onto the courtyard, while the four cubes at the corners shelter the colleges, with their living-quarters on several storeys and their own inner courts.

Let us make clear that the scheme we have just described is the underlying one; the proportions of the various spaces fit into it only approximately. If the four oratories were of the same breadth as the courtyard, their edges would coincide and the sides of this central cube which is the courtyard would be obscured. It is this latter which is the real architectural theme—a cube made of light and empty space





which, by inverse analogy, evokes the memory of the Kaʿba.

The four oratories, which are also auditoriums, correspond to the four traditional schools of canonical law, and the same applies to the four colleges placed in the corners of the building. The oratory situated on the *qiblah* side, which is vaster than the rest, corresponds to the Ḥanafī school which is predominant in Egypt; the opposite hall is reserved for the Mālikī school, while the two halls to the right and left of the *qiblah* belong to the Ḥanbalī and Shafiʿī schools respectively. The partitioning of the four schools into four halls arranged in the shape of a cross round a central court is a classical one and goes back to such famous models as the Niẓāmiyyah *madrasah* at Nishapur and the Mustanṣiriyyah *madrasah* at Baghdad, of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries respectively. It was apparently the Seljuks who first spread the already existing institution of the *madrasah*, a school for Islamic sciences which had previously been taught in the mosques.

The co-existence of four schools of canon law within the framework of Sunnī Islam calls for some explanation. The historical foundation of these schools occurred at the end of a period characterized, in the context of branches of knowledge, by the collection of all the oral and written traditions concerning the words and deeds of the Prophet and his Companions. It was on the basis of this collection, which, by reason of the progressive remoteness of their origins, could not have been pushed further, that each of the founding *imāms* of the four schools made a particular selection from among the occasionally divergent material. Essentially, there is no contradiction between the four schools, whose differences concern only secondary aspects of law or ritual. According to a saying of the Prophet, "the divergences of scholars are an expression of (Divine) Mercy".

The fact that the number of schools recognized by Sunnī Islam should be limited to four—Shīʿism has its own system—corresponds to what might be termed one of Islam's

Opposite: **208.** The main *miḥrāb* and *minbar* in the south-eastern *īwān* of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque



209. Cupola of the atrium of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque

structural laws. At all levels of Islam, there are to be found, in fact, groups of four principles or four elements which, generally speaking, relate to a fifth point of reference which is their foundation or center. Thus, for example, there are four "rightly guided" caliphs representing the Prophet, and four "pillars" of religion, namely, prayer, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage, all linked to a fifth which is the attestation of faith; in the same way, a Muslim may marry up to four wives. And this leads us back to architecture and to the plan of the Arab or Iranian house with its four sections opening onto a central court, which is perhaps at the root of the four-sectional *madrasah*.

Let us turn now to the main oratory of the Sultan Ḥasan mosque, which contains the *miḥrāb* and the *minbar* as well as a kind of stage for reciters of the Koran. Two doors, to



210. Marble panel in the vestibule of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque

the right and left of the *miḥrāb*, lead towards the mausoleum of the Sultan, which is placed in the direction of the *qiblah*, contrary to the rule which forbids even the appearance of any cult of the dead.

The oratory is as high as the nave of a Gothic cathedral, but its shape is extremely simple. Its very ample ogival vault covers the space in a single curve. There is no suggestion of heaviness, for the indirect light reflected from the courtyard floods over it. At night, lamps of colored glass were hung from chains suspended in large numbers from the ceiling.

The decoration of this oratory is very restrained. The walls are bare except round the *miḥrāb*, where they are paneled in marble of various shades from ivory to cornelian red. The most beautiful piece of ornamentation is, however, the frieze of Kūfī script which runs along the walls where they join the vault and which is extended towards the court; very probably, it used to extend round all four oratories. The letters, which are very large, rise up against an unbroken surge of stylized scroll patterns, whose eddying motion emphasizes, by sheer contrast, the hieratic progress of the lettering. Nowhere, perhaps, is there a more perfect visual echo than this of the psalmody of the Koran.

In the middle of the court there rises a covered fountain, which probably did not always have the composition it reveals today, but which, in its overall shape of an octagon passing into a hemisphere, serves very well to complete the essentially cubic architecture of the *madrasah* mosque.



211. Detail of the stucco frieze in Kūfī script running around the south-eastern *īwān* of the Sultan Ḥasan College Mosque

6 *Ottoman Mosques*

There is a certain modern aesthetic which, in a not unreasonable reaction against the separation of "art" and "technique" in European architecture at the beginning of the twentieth century, proclaims that architecture and construction are one and the same thing and that a building is beautiful to the extent that it is "functional". In fact, architecture which finds it necessary to dissimulate its structure is simply bad architecture, but a functionally constructed building is not necessarily beautiful, if art is to be typified by beauty. It must not be forgotten that a function may be, to a greater or lesser extent, marginal in relation to the position occupied in the world by man in his normal state, and that certain functions owe their existence to man's decadence or to his forgetting the inward sources of happiness and beauty. The only beautiful work of art is one which, in some way, reflects integral human nature whatever its incidental function. A sacred architecture is beautiful precisely because it corresponds to man's most central function, which is to be an intermediary between Heaven and Earth.

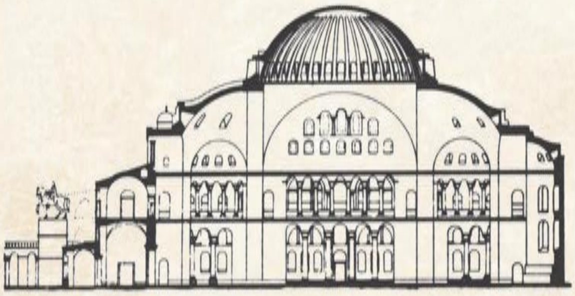


Figure 44: Section of Saint (Hagia) Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey

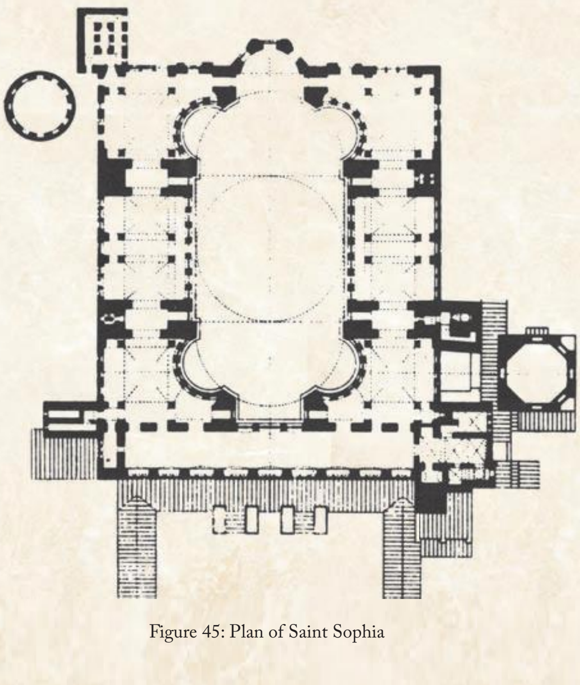


Figure 45: Plan of Saint Sophia

In sacred art there is no separation between art and technique or between the search for beauty and the method of construction. There are, assuredly, problems of statics that arise in the course of construction, but their definitive solution lies in the "qualitative geometry" which regulates all sacred architecture and which never lacks a symbolic content because it expresses, in its own fashion, the link that joins multiplicity to unity.

A particularly striking example of this order of things is the theme of the mosque with a central dome and a rectangular base, which, with all its variations, was developed by Turkish Ottoman architecture. Mosques with a central cupola already existed, as a type, in the Turkish sultanates of Anatolia even before the Ottomans had conquered Constantinople and taken a close look at the great architecture of the Byzantines. It is a matter of fairly simple but well-defined structures: a cubical building surmounted by a hemispheric crown, in which the transitional zone between the sphere and the cube is composed, in the interior, of triangular facets assembled in more or less open fan-shapes; and this system is both rational and decorative and accentuates the monolithic aspect of this architecture.

The cubical building we have just described constitutes the oratory proper, which may well be preceded by other structures, notably a kind of atrium, also cubic and crowned with a cupola, where there is a fountain for ablutions, and this takes over the role played in less harsh climates by the mosque courtyard. Such is the layout, for example, of the Green Mosque, the Yeşil Cami, at Bursa, built in 1405 A.D.

Opposite: **212**. Interior of the Hagia Sophia


محمد عليه السلام
الله جل جلاله



213. General view of the Hagia Sophia

When the Turks conquered the Byzantine capital, they found themselves confronted with the architectural marvel of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia, with its immense dome "suspended from the sky". Not only did this sanctuary surpass in grandeur anything that Muslim architects had been able to build—it is only in Muslim India that much larger domed buildings saw the light of day—it was also fascinating as sheer space, which came very close to that of Islam by its contemplative quality and yet differed from it by its liturgical reverberations. It was transformed into a mosque immediately after the siege of the city by Meḥmed II, without changing its appearance; it was only very much later that the mosaics above the gateway depicting the Holy Virgin and those of the Cherubim on the pendentives of the cupola were plastered over; only the Pantocrator at the center of the dome was replaced by a Koranic inscription; it was a highly appropriate one, namely, the verse of light which we quoted in connection with the prayer-niche (*miḥrāb*) (p. 93). Perhaps it was felt that this sanctuary, predating Islam's historical manifestation, was in some way a prefiguration of it. In fact it belongs to it, in the name of Wisdom (Sophia), which is universal, and by virtue of a victory that could only be providential.



214. Dome of Saint Sophia with the Koranic inscription of the Verse of Light, 24:35

The special constructional feature of the Hagia Sophia, the happy invention of its creator, is the use he makes of half-cupolas as counter-buttresses to the pull of the immense dome.



215. General view of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey

This dome rests on four arches, two of which coincide with the profiles of the half-cupolas, which have the same diameter as the central dome. The other two arches each soar around a vertical wall pierced with windows which are extended beneath by screens of arcades; these latter separate the lateral naves with their galleries from the main nave. These naves are powerfully structured to take the lateral pull of the cupolas. The combination of a central cupola with two half-cupolas, which are extended, in their turn, by several apses, serves not only the purpose of static equilibrium; it accentuates the east-west axis of the sanctuary at the same time, in accordance with Christian liturgy. This means that the inner space is concentrated by the sphere of the dome and, at the same time, deployed directionally by the axial extension of the vaults, which makes it uncertain and, as it were, fluctuating, and this shifting quality is heightened by the apparent emergence of the various cupolas one out of the other without the eye being able to gauge their contours or extent.

The cathedral of Justinian was a model which the Ottoman architects could hardly ignore, but which impelled them to the twofold exploration of a method of building on that same scale and of a means of adapting space to the liturgical requirements of Islam. The twofold exploration can be followed in its entirety in the work of Sinān, the great Turkish architect born about the year 1490 A.D. and dying in 1583 A.D.

"Architects in Christian lands"—wrote Sinān in his memoirs—"could account themselves superior to the Muslims in technical



216. Courtyard of the Sultan Süleymān Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey

knowledge, because Muslims have not succeeded in creating anything comparable to the dome of the Hagia Sophia. To be thus confronted with an apparently insurmountable difficulty has wounded the writer of these lines to the heart. Yet, with God's help and by the favor of the Sovereign, I have succeeded in constructing for the mosque of Sultan Selīm a dome that exceeds that of the Hagia Sophia by four cubits in breadth and six in height." These words seem to show that Sinān was preoccupied above all with the quantitative aspect of the construction of the Hagia Sophia dome. However, quite apart from the fact that building on such a colossal scale, and with the manual rather than machine methods of the time, makes physical grandeur a sign of the intrinsic quality of an edifice, there can be no mistaking the fact that Sinān's work, or the progressive realization of his aims, does itself prove that the search for a kind of space more suited to the spirit of Islam obsessed him quite as much as the need to achieve a technical victory over the Byzantine master-builders.

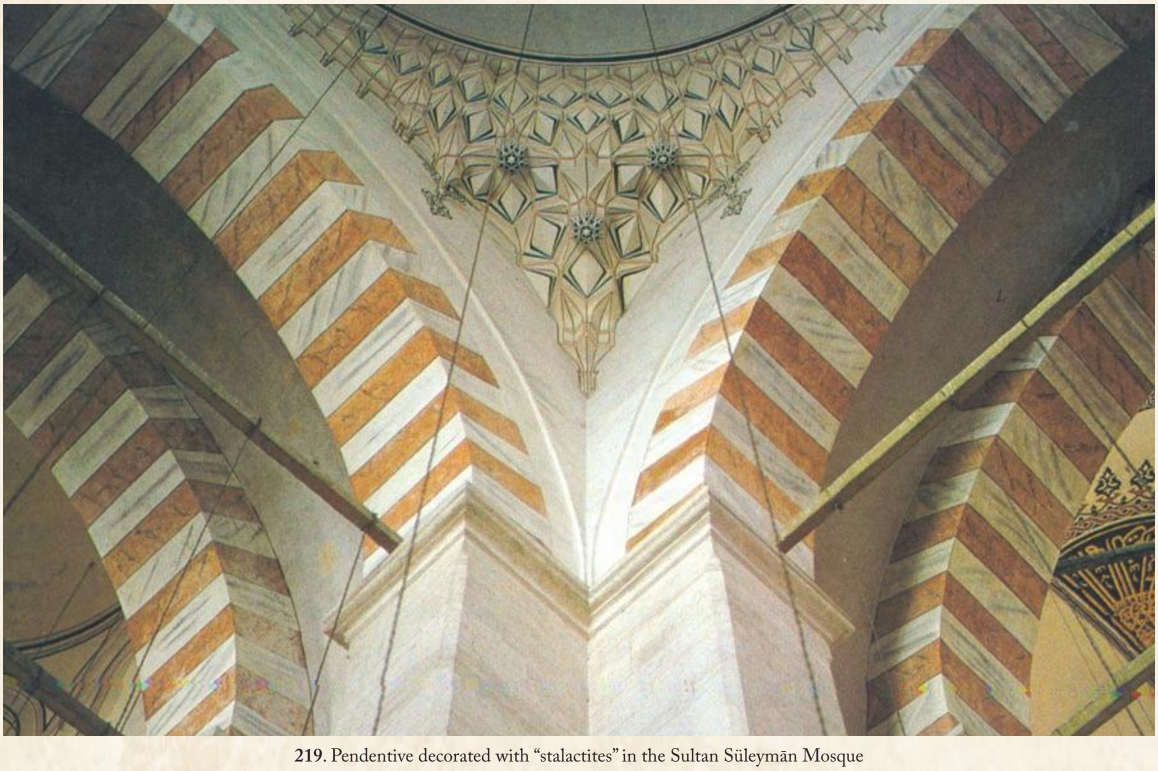
Facile comparisons are too often made between Sinān and the great architects of the European Renaissance, whose contemporary he roughly was; but he is far from their artistic Prometheanism. If he appears to veer away from tradition, it is only to return to it step by step. The great mosque of Sultan Selīm at Edirne, which he himself calls his masterpiece, is no more than an expanded version of the dome on an octagon crowning a cubic edifice. To win through to this "classical" solution, Sinān passed through various phases, the chronological order of which does not necessarily correspond to



217. Aerial view of the Sultan Süleymān Mosque complex



218. The big central cupola with the two semi-cupolas in the Sultan Süleymān Mosque

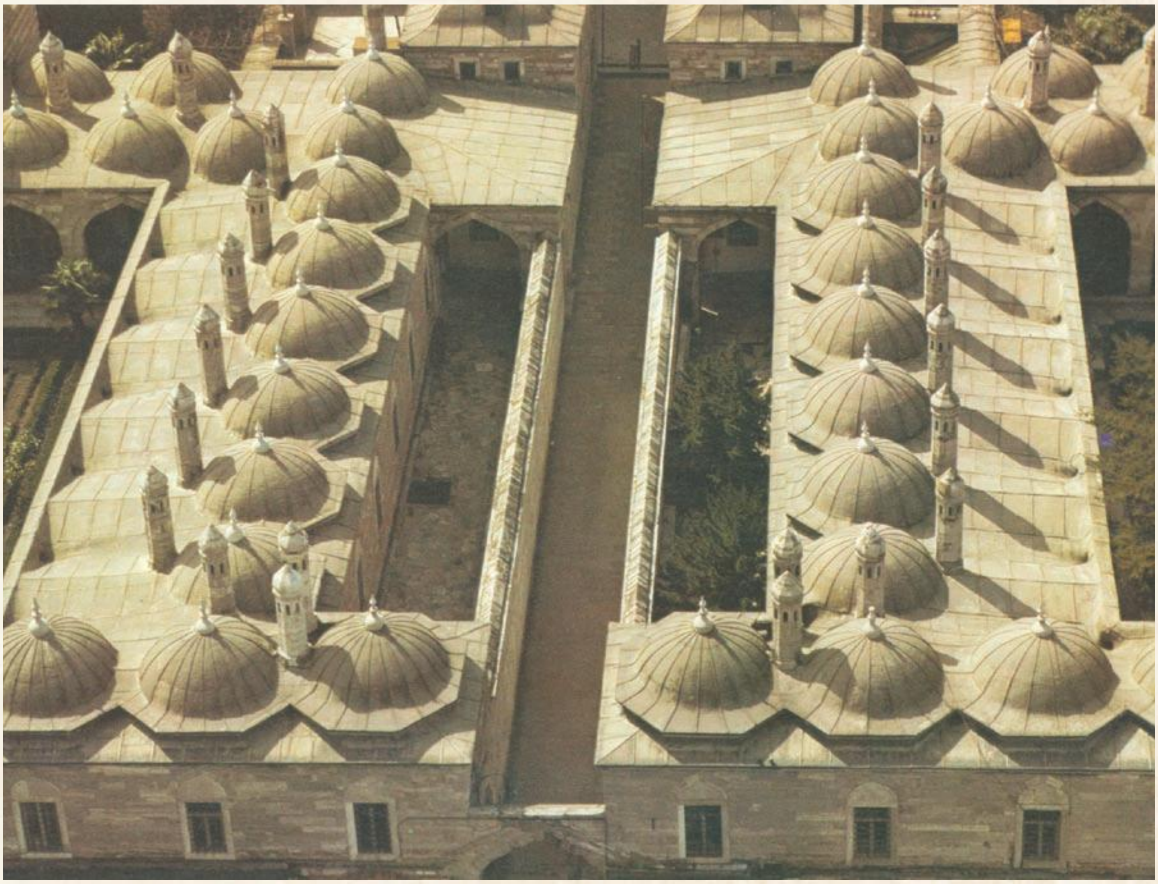


219. Pendentive decorated with “stalactites” in the Sultan Süleymān Mosque

their logical order, since an architect may have an idea without immediately having an opportunity to put it into practice.

Thus the first two mosques of the series, the Shehzadeh and the Mihrimah in Istanbul, are further removed from their celebrated Byzantine model than the third, the mosque of Sultan Süleymān, built between 1550 and 1561 A.D., whose plan is a direct reflection of that of the Hagia Sophia, as if the master had wished to exhaust this theme before setting out purposefully on a fresh path.

The mosque of Sultan Süleymān, situated on one of the hills which dominate the Golden Horn, achieves almost the same proportions as the cathedral of Saint Sophia. Like the latter, it is surmounted by a great central dome with two half-cupolas of the same diameter serving it as counterweights. These, in their turn, are prolonged by apses. The lateral pull of the cupolas is likewise compensated by two lesser naves which, in this case, open out broadly onto the central space and are flooded with light, so that the square base of the building is everywhere perceptible. This is one trait which distinguishes the interior of this mosque from its Byzantine prototype; in Justinian's cathedral the lateral naves are concealed behind a screen of arcades; they are plunged into shadow, and one is hardly aware of the building's outermost boundaries. Byzantine space remains indefinite, whereas Turco-Muslim art loves the crystalline definition of forms. For this same reason, Sinān made all the articulations of space, such as the pillars and the arches which support the vaults, sharp and well-defined. Finally, he made use of radiating apses to bring back the contour of the two great half-cupolas into the rectangular plan of the building. It is in this detail, the skilled



220. View of the twin *madrasahs* on the south-west side of the Sultan Süleymān Mosque



221. Interior of the Sultan Süleymān Mosque

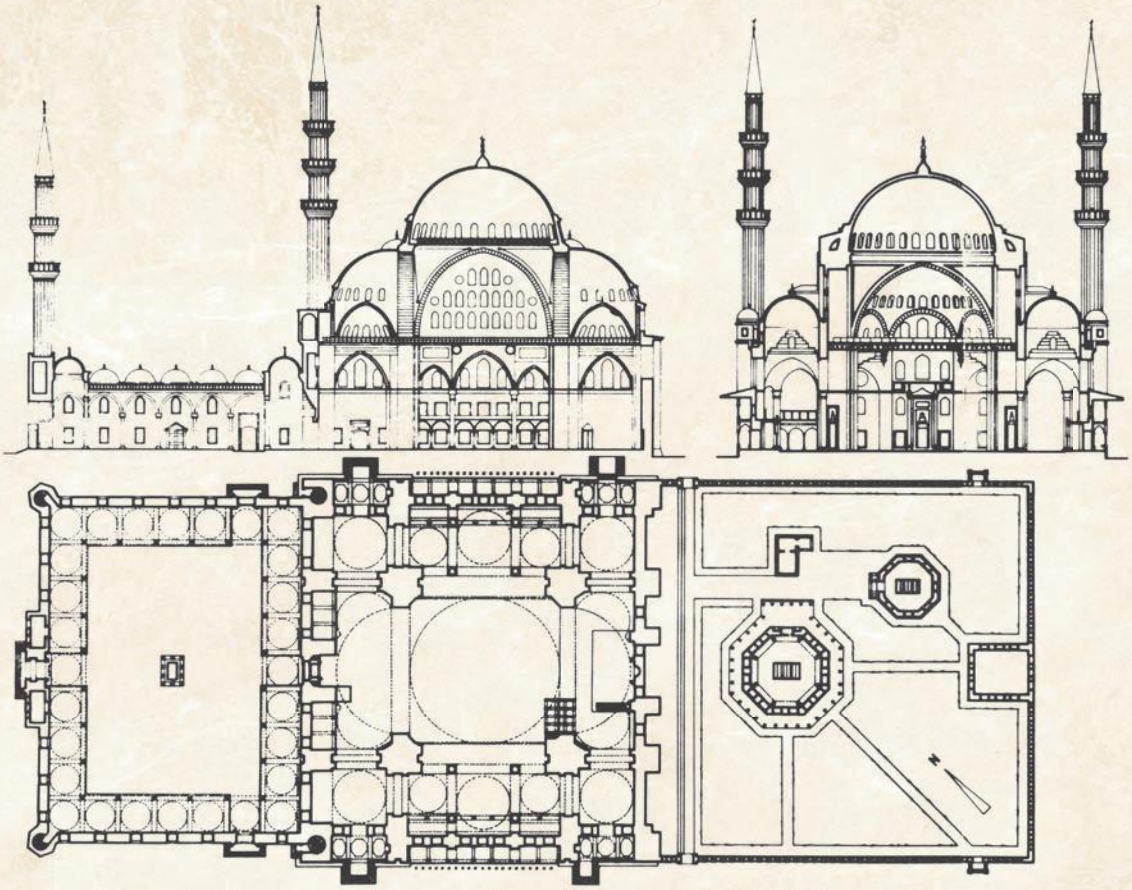


Figure 46: Plan and main sections of the Sultan Süleymān Mosque

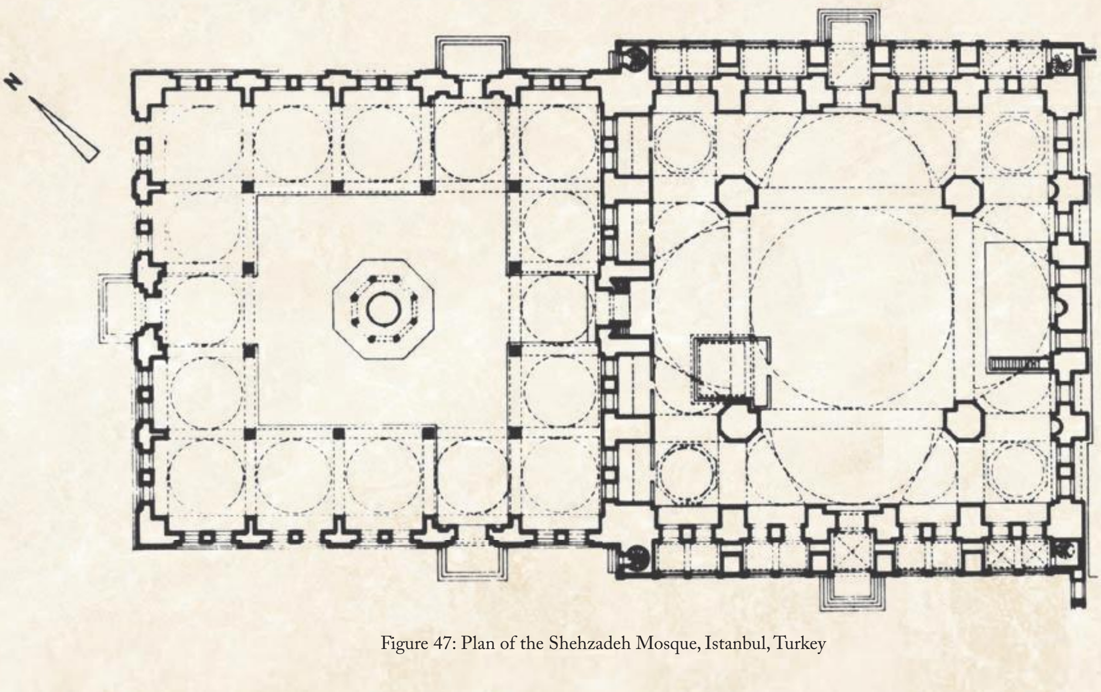


Figure 47: Plan of the Shehzadeh Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey



222. General view of the Shehzadeh Mosque



223. The main cupola in the Shehzadeh Mosque

combination of concave and rectilinear surfaces, that is manifested Sinān's particular genius.

Let us return now to the first of the mosques we mentioned, that of Shehzadeh, whose dome, buttressed by four half-cupolas, represents a first attempt to transform the structural system of the Hagia Sophia in the direction of concentric symmetry. To lead the contours of the half-cupolas back to the rectangle of the base, Sinān resorts also to radial apses, and he completes the calix of the vaults by four small cupolas set in the corners of the square. This system has the advantage—or disadvantage, depending on how one looks at it—of disengaging the four main pillars, supporting the dome, from the outer walls, and this arrangement lets in the light from all sides. But Sinān appears not to have taken account of this possibility; what he was seeking was inner space perfectly unified.



224. Interior of the Shehzadeh Mosque

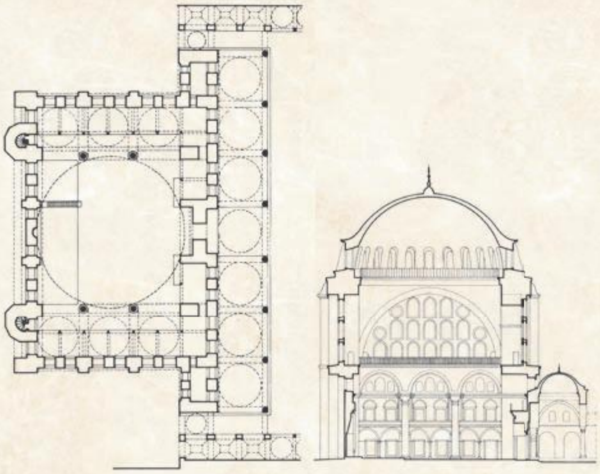
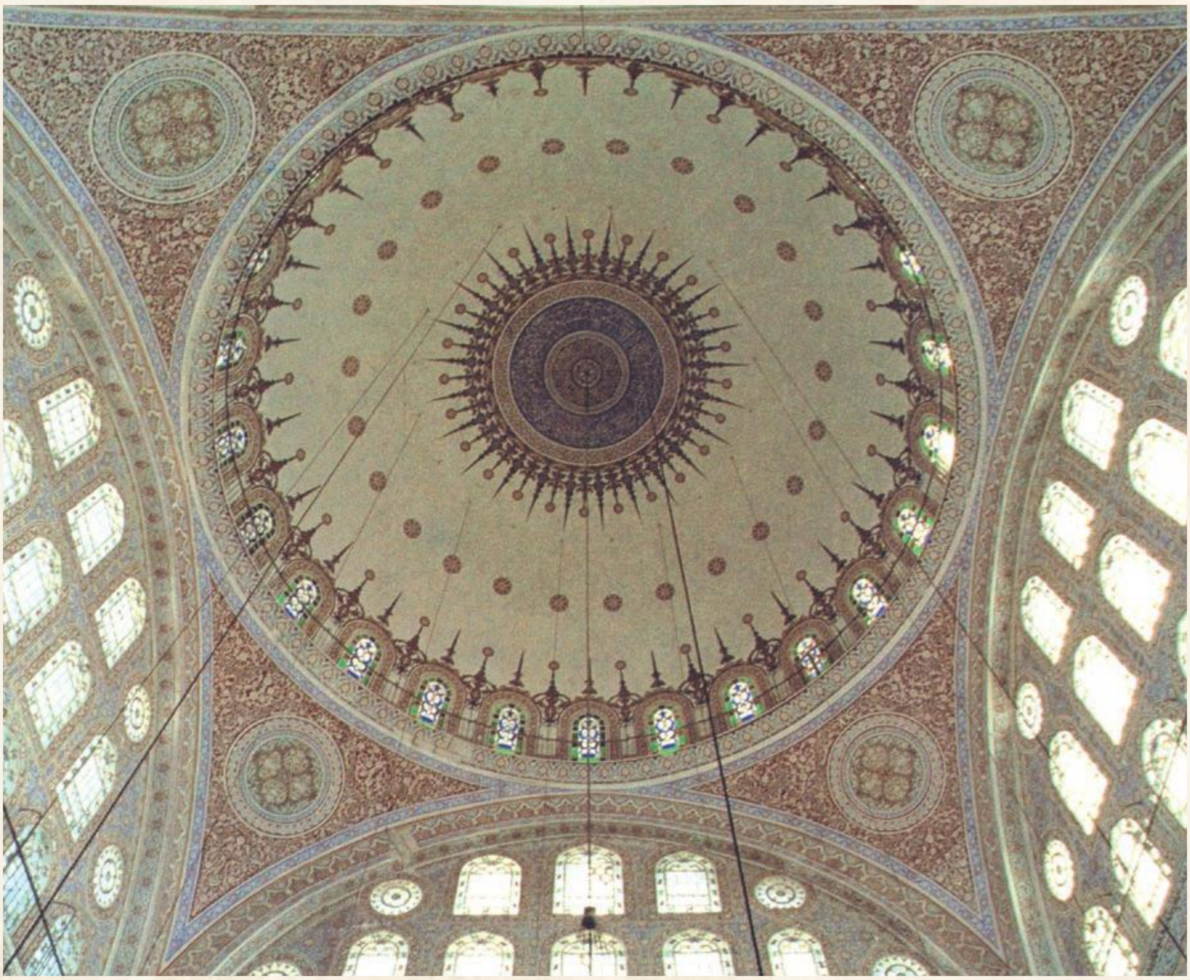


Figure 48: Plan and section of the Mihrimah Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey

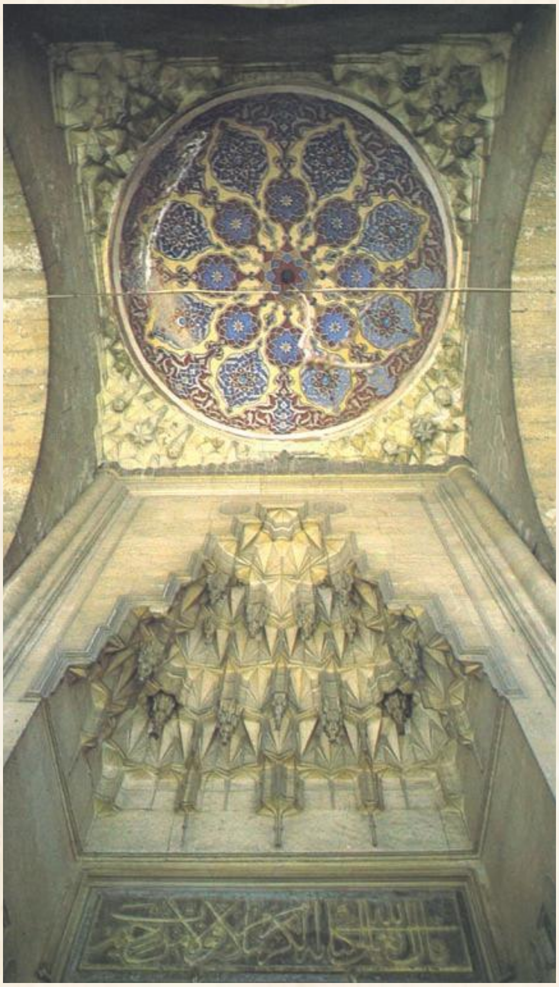
So it was that he built, as a second approach to his ideal, the mosque of Princess Mihrimah, the static structure of which is extremely skilled, while its inner space is of crystalline limpidity. This time, Sinān dispenses with half-cupolas and apses and allows the four great arches, which support the dome and are filled in with a screen of windows, to appear on the outside. The lateral pressure of the dome is sustained entirely on the pendentives which are buttressed by four pillars in the form of small towers. The interior of the mosque is free of any reinforcing structures; it is as if surrounded by a single fabric which is both weightless and diaphanous. Sinān thus achieved, by very different means, the ideal of the architects of the Gothic cathedrals—a space marked out by luminous walls.



225. The cupola seen from inside the Mihrimah Mosque



226. Interior of the Mihrimah Mosque



227. Cupola at the entrance of the Sokullu Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey



228. Courtyard of the Sokullu Mosque

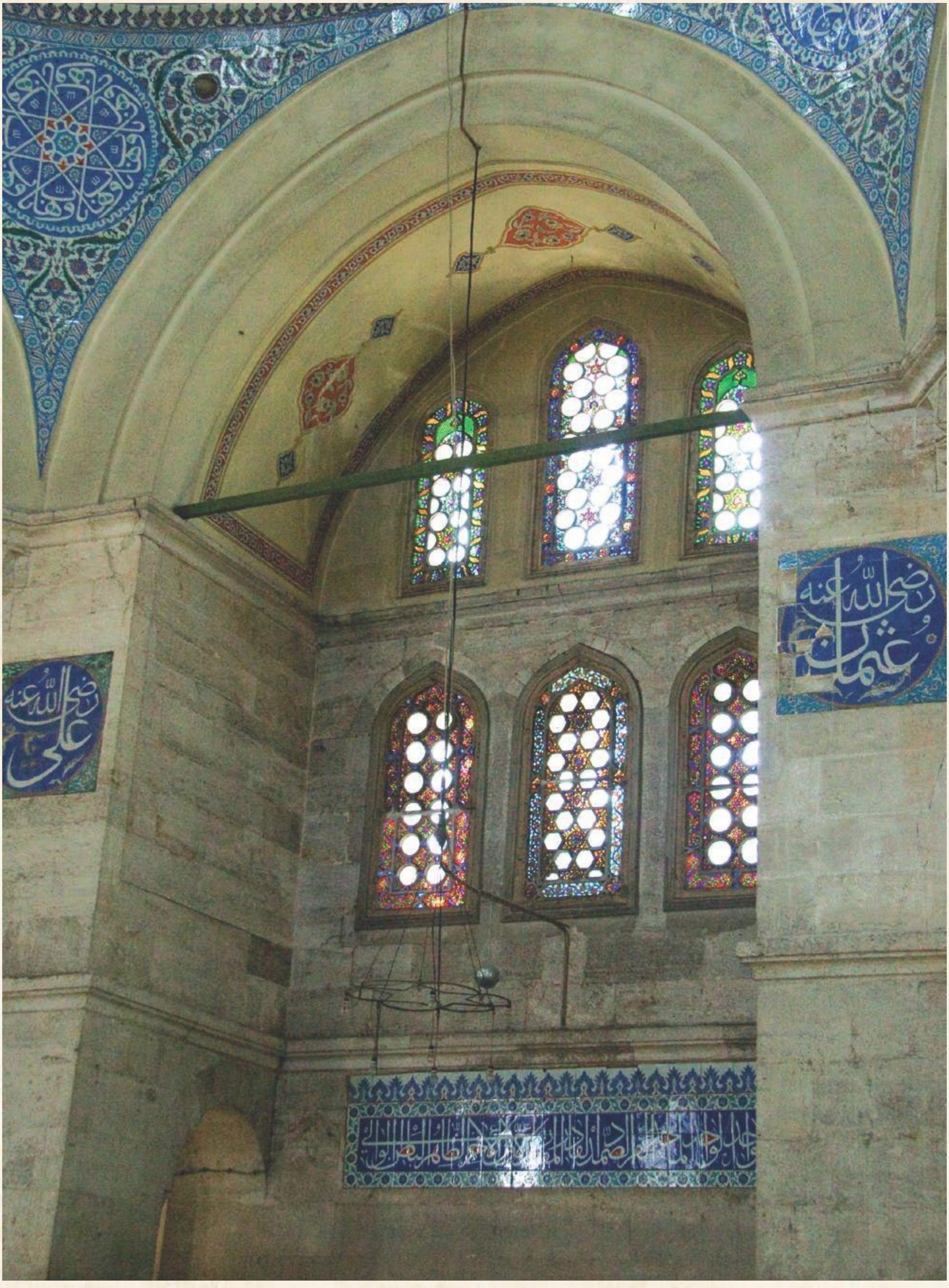
The outer aspect of mosques with a central cupola evolved in the same direction as their internal arrangement, that is, towards a more lucid and geometrical articulation of forms. Whereas the cathedral of Saint Sophia has the exterior appearance of a mountain, with vaults and counterweight piled up against one another, the mosque of Shehzadeh now reveals a neatly ordered hierarchy of cupolas and half-cupolas. The central dome was now to emerge with increasing authority from its surroundings.

Let us note in this context that Ottoman mosques are true to tradition in being generally approached by way of a courtyard surrounded by porticos on top of which is a series of small cupolas. Finally, "royal" mosques are generally surrounded by annexes of indefinite extension, schools, hospitals, and rest-houses, the entire complex being designated by the expression *kulliyyah*, meaning "totality" or "university".

The relatively small mosque of Sokullu Pasha, which Sinān built between the years 1570 and 1571 A.D., has to be considered in relation to its great courtyard, the center of which is marked by a covered fountain and which gives access to the buildings of a *madrasah* attached to the mosque. The mosque itself has a rectangular base, one of the longer sides of which faces the courtyard, with the other corresponding to the *qiblah*. The dome rests upon six arches whose supporting points form a hexagon set into the rectangle of the building. Two of these arches



229. *Miḥrāb* and *minbar* of the Sokullu Mosque



230. Detail of the interior of the Sokullu Mosque



231. The cupolas from inside the Sokullu Mosque

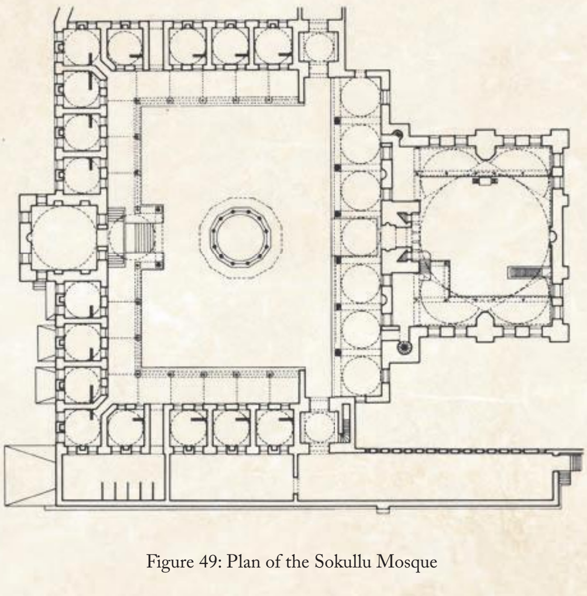
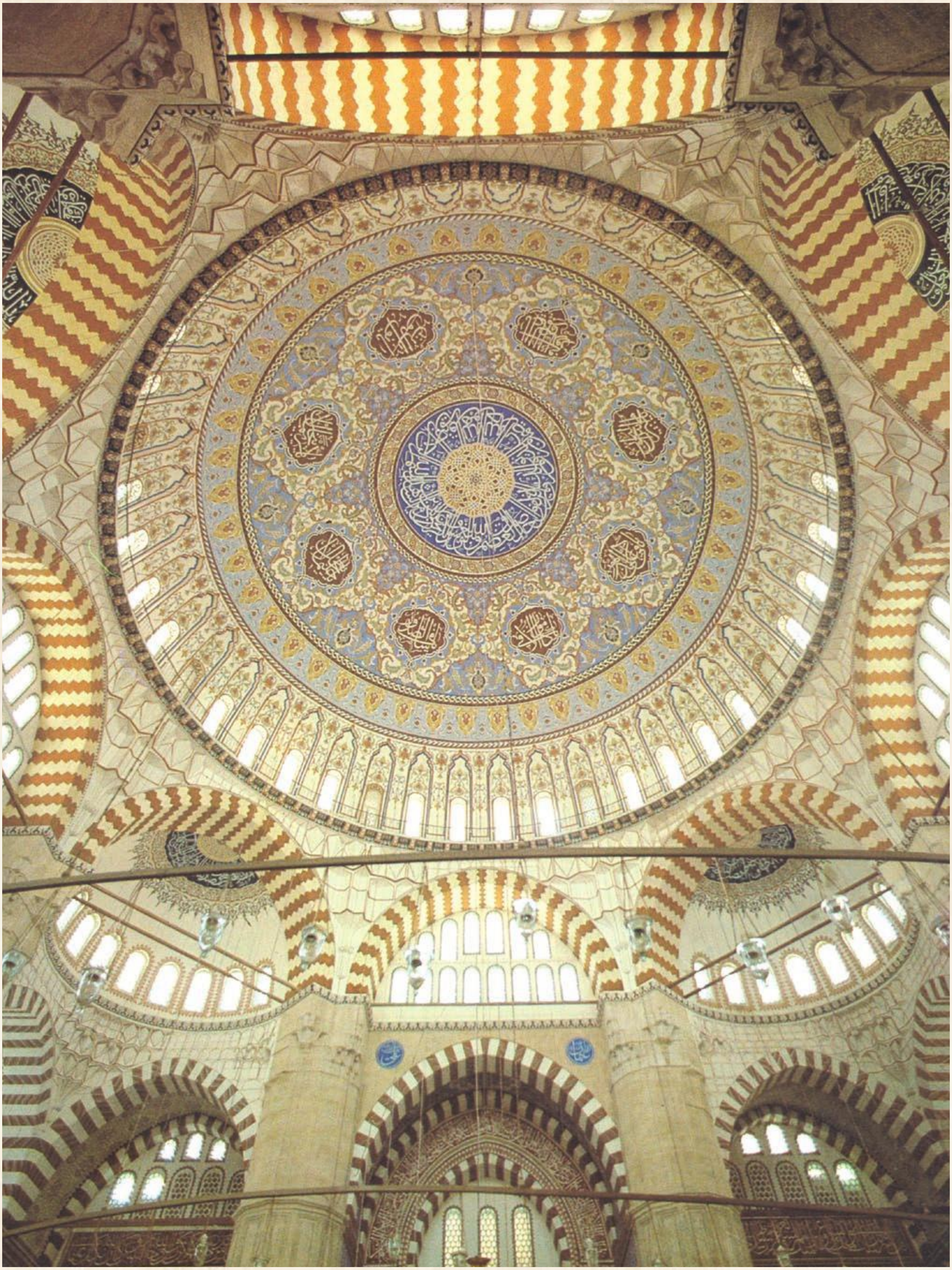


Figure 49: Plan of the Sokullu Mosque

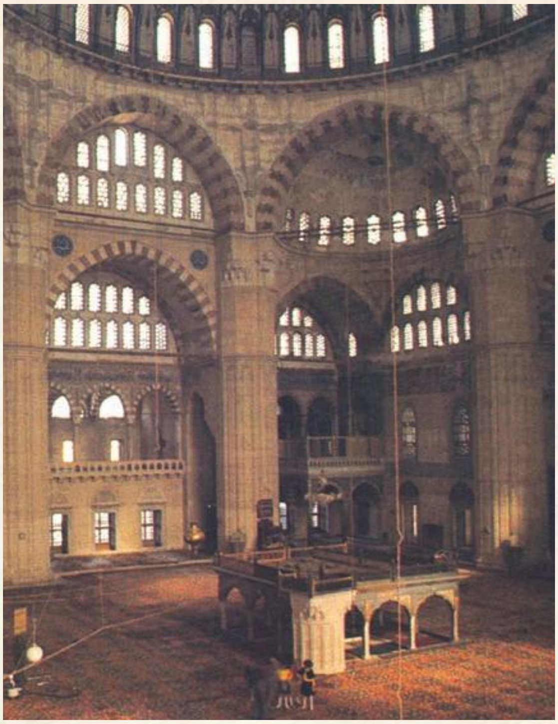
are designed on the walls of the entrance and of the *qiblah*. The other four open out onto half-cupolas whose bases link up, by way of friezes in *muqarnas*, with the angles of the straight walls. In this plan, which derives from ancient Anatolian models, all the supports are built into the building's four walls or are joined to them by the intermediation of *muqarnas*, stalactites that are like a sudden crystallization of the rotary movement of the vaults. The oratory is as if hewn out of ice or rock-crystal. Meanwhile, the wall of the *qiblah* or, more precisely, that part of the wall that is delimited by one of the six arches and surrounds the *miḥrāb*, is covered in ceramic tiles with a joyful coloring—floral motives in which azure blue, milky white, and pomegranate red predominate, alternating with



232. The central cupola from inside the Sultan Selīm Mosque, Edirne, Turkey

rosettes of interlaced letters and inscribed panels in majestic Thuluth script. The "remembrance" of God brings the soul peace as snow covers all the earth's wounds and impurities; at the same time it is happiness and springtime.

When Sinān finished the mosque of Sokullu, that of Sultan Selīm had already been started upon, since it was constructed between 1569 and 1575 A.D. To support its colossal dome, he chose the octagon, which fits quite naturally into a square and is close enough to a circle for the junction between it and the base of the dome to be realizable by a delicate *muqarnas* relief. Sinān therefore rested the very dome, measuring ninety-six feet across, on eight ogival arches, whose eight supporting pillars are joined to the outer walls. Four half-cupolas, much less ample than the dome, slip into the building's four corner-angles; they play an analogous role to that of the corner squinches in more primitive domed buildings. The alternation of rectilinear and



233. The interior of the Sultan Selīm Mosque

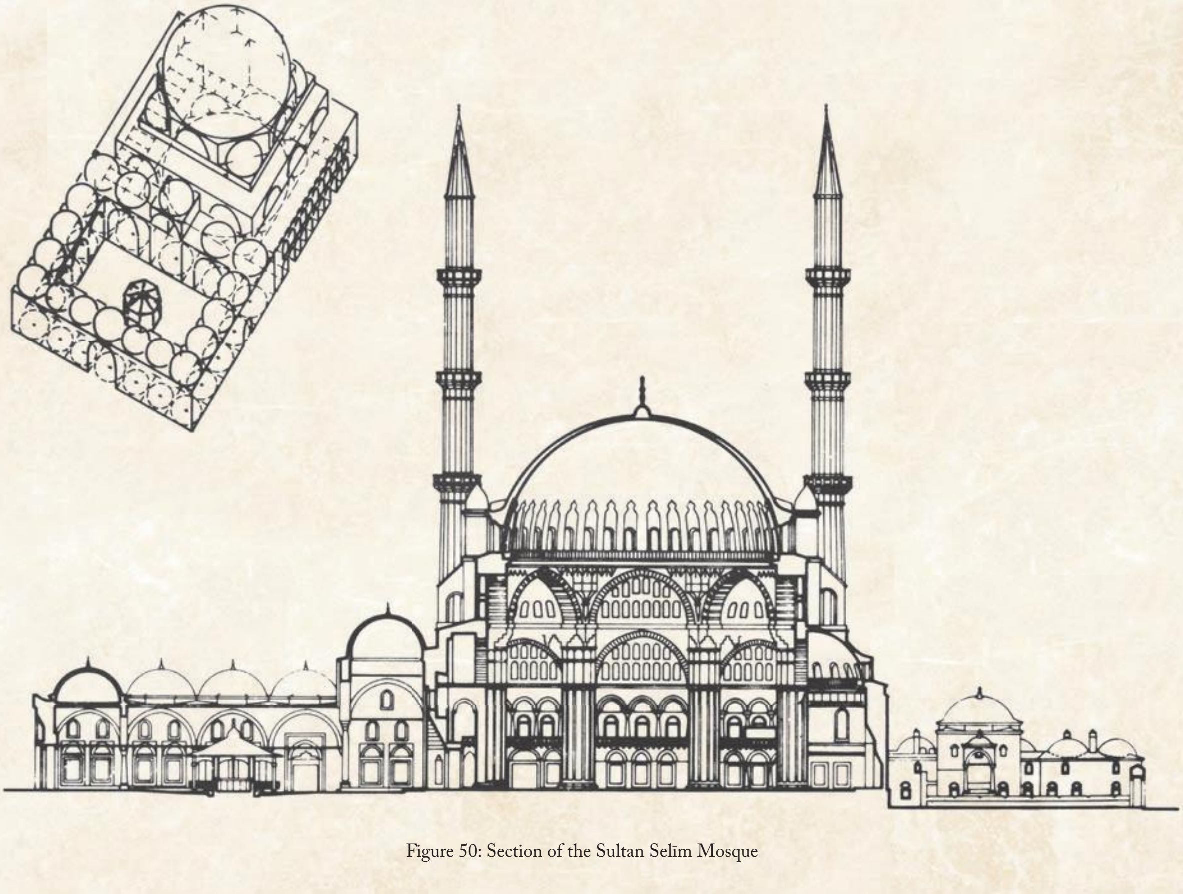
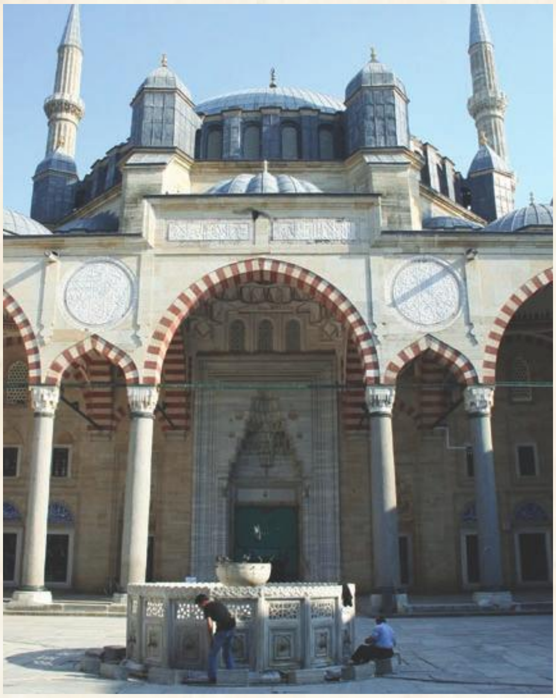


Figure 50: Section of the Sultan Selīm Mosque



234. Detail of the arcades in the courtyard of the Sultan Selīm Mosque



235. Fountain in the courtyard of the Sultan Selīm Mosque

concave walls, which results from this plan, is partly compensated for by the *miḥrāb*'s being sheltered in an apse, whereas the corner walls, which are overhung by the half-cupolas, affirm the practically square base of the building; we say "practically" because there is a slight difference between the building's length and breadth, which takes into consideration the distribution of the galleries and of lighting.

Wherever there is a transition between a plane and a curved surface, Sinān uses *muqarnas*. This element, together with the precision with which each outline is traced, means that nothing in this architecture is left undefined. It does not, however, recall the obsession with "finish" which typifies the classic and aspiringly classical styles of post-mediaeval Europe. The adamantine perfection of the mosque of Sultan Selīm has something timeless about it; it evokes the vision of things in pure simultaneity; time stands still; sphere becomes cube; the instant becomes space. That is the fundamental theme of Islamic architecture.

The exterior of the mosque of Sultan Selīm matches its interior, which indirectly proves the quality of its structure: between the celestial sphere of the dome and the earthly immobility of the square base, there is an increasingly generous and stately rotation of facets that are alternately convex and plane.

The elements of Byzantine architecture are still present, yet integrated into a new order. The unique and unforgettable creation of Ottoman architecture is, however, the combination of a building with a central dome and needle-like minarets; by its undifferentiated plenitude, the dome betokens peace and submission (*islām*), while the vertical movement of the minarets, leaping audaciously towards the sky from the corners of their base, is sheer vigilance, an active attestation (*shahādah*) to Divine Unity.



236. General view of the Sultan Selīm Mosque



7 *The Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān*

The distinctive style of Persian mosques is largely explicable in terms of an architectural inheritance of great antiquity which is bound up with a certain technique of construction using only brick and, in consequence, replacing beam roofs by vaults and domes. For monumental architecture it is plain or colored hard brick that is used, and when we think of Persian art, it is this technique with all its refinements that comes to mind. But this technique derives from another which is both more ancient and more ephemeral and which can be described as folk-art, although it implies a considerable knowledge of statics. We are referring to the art of building in raw brick, dried in the sun and jointed with clay. Masters of this art are capable of erecting vaults and domes without recourse to wooden scaffolding, by fashioning their crowns on simple reed molds—whence derive Persian vaults with ribs on the outside—and by taking advantage of the tension inherent

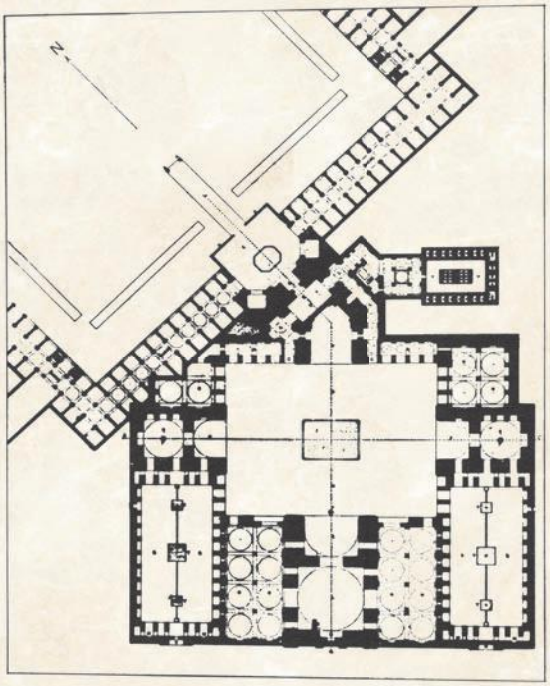


Figure 51: Plan of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān, Persia



238. Aerial view of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān

Opposite: **237**. South-western *īwān* in the courtyard of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān





240. Main entrance to the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān

in curved surfaces to hold the work in place. Fragile in appearance, this architecture of mud or clay is astonishingly durable, provided it is well maintained, and extremely beautiful by reason of its being, in a way, modeled by hand. Among the peoples who practice it—and it is found in Persia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Upper Egypt—it quite naturally develops a great plastic sensibility, akin to that of the potter, and it is this sensibility which appears to make its mark on monumental Persian architecture, where delicacy of modeling is combined with geometrical precision.

The characteristic forms of Persian architecture include the *īwān*, a lofty semicircular vault, generally closed on one side and open on the other. The largest vault of this kind surmounts the throne-room at Ctesiphon, former residence of the Sasanid kings. It is constructed in baked brick, but its outline, with the curve starting out from the floor, is in complete conformity with architecture in raw brick, since it is analogous inversely to the celebrated "catenary curve", the parabola described by a chain hung loosely between two fixed points; it shows the optimal degree of tension for the contours of a vault.

Opposite: **239**. The twin minarets of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān



The Persian art of Islam kept this form of vault, but improved on it from the aesthetic point of view by assimilating it to the keel-arch.

The *īwān* is capable of various uses and it may, accordingly, assume the form of a vault, a gateway, or a niche. These are the fundamental forms of Persian architecture, to which should be added the dome or cupola which plays a synthesizing role.

Briefly, the classical type of Persian mosque consists of a high gateway giving access to a courtyard surrounded by vaulted galleries; opposite the gateway and on the axis of the *miḥrāb* there opens out a great *īwān* which communicates with a room sheltering the *miḥrāb* and crowned with a dome. There are frequently smaller *īwāns* opening out onto the side-walls of the courtyard.

If we consider no more than the plan of the whole, it is not difficult to detect the familiar elements of the traditional peristyle mosque with particular emphasis on the axis of the *miḥrāb*. It is in the matter of elevation that the shapes change their aspect and quality, with the horizontal roofs giving place to vaults and cupolas. Thus it is that the gradual passage from the "high gateway" to the courtyard, wide open to the sky, and thence to the deep vault of the *īwān*, and finally to the perfectly self-contained interior of the dome involves a whole series of contrasts as well as a progress towards increasingly interiorized forms of space.

The gate, niche, and dome, being forms always charged with a certain quality of the sacred, assume a dominant role. The gateway to the mosque is, moreover, nearly always flanked by two minarets resembling tall columns, which recalls the primordial symbol of the gate of heaven placed between two opposing and complementary manifestations of the one and only world-axis. The gateway of the Temple at Jerusalem, with its two columns called Yakin and Boaz, expresses the same idea. In the Islamic context, this can only be a reminiscence which nevertheless has its analogy in speech, for the Persian and Turkish expression for "high gateway" is synonymous with majesty and authority. One speaks also of the "gate of Divine Mercy", and the title of "gate" is given to personalities who, in the traditional order, play the role of intercessors or intermediaries, as in the well-known saying of the Prophet, "I am the city of knowledge and ʿAlī is its gate".

For the Shīʿis, whose separatism is justified by the spiritual and temporal authority allegedly handed down by the Prophet to ʿAlī and his descendants, this saying takes on a quite special importance. Although Muslim theology does not generally insist upon the principle of mediation, for fear that the cult of the divine man should overshadow the unicity and omnipotence of God, Shīʿism has made an exception to this rule and in this respect comes somewhat close to Christianity.

It is not surprising that one of the major works of the Safavid period—marked by the victory of Shīʿism in Persia—should be a variation on the theme of the gateway; we are referring to the Shāh Mosque (*Masjid-i-Shāh*) in Iṣfahan.

It was built in 1628-1629 in the reign of Shāh Abbās I, and its plan must have been the work of Bahāʾ ad-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī who was then Shaykh al-Islām in Iṣfahān, that is, the supreme religious authority, as well as minister of the *awqāf*, or religious foundations. He combined in his person the loftiest aspects of Safavid culture; a mathematician and architect, he is celebrated for the dam he erected on the river Zayāndeh Rūd, which was then able to irrigate the entire area, and even more for his mystic poetry which is sung even today in the "inns" of Iṣfahān.

The Shāh Mosque is part of the great town-planning scheme of Abbās I, the center of which is the polo-ground, the Maydān, a vast rectangular space surrounded by a gallery of *īwān* niches and leading via its northern gateway to the great *bāzār*, the town's commercial artery. The mosque stands opposite to this gateway at the other end of the Maydān. On its west side, the Maydān touches the precinct of

Opposite: **241.** The big outer portal of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān



242. *Īwān* opening onto the courtyard of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān

the royal residence, which encroaches on it in the form of a porch-way, the ʿAlī Qāpū ("High Gate") topped by a lookout in the shape of a pavilion with slender wooden columns. Facing it on the eastern side of the Maydān there rises the mosque of Shaykh Luṭf-Allāh with its dome of green and golden-yellow tiles.

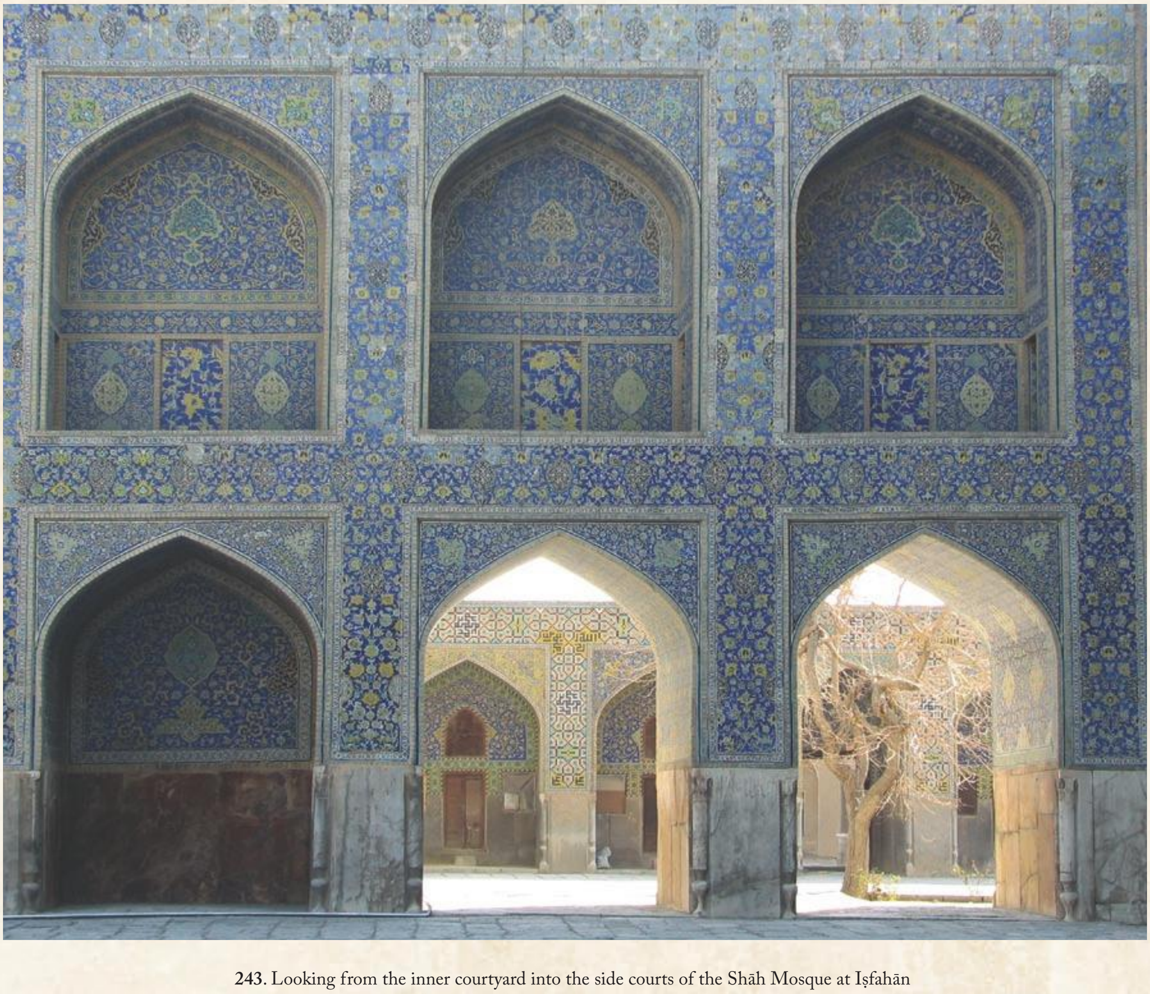
The gateway of the Shāh Mosque is contained within the enclosure of the Maydān which is pushed back at this point to form a sort of exedra as if to heighten the welcoming aspect of the gateway whose opening sinks into the shadow cast by a tall recess with *muqarnas*. Two minarets stand watch over the entrance.

Once one steps over the threshold and crosses the atrium, which is a prolongation of the gateway, there occurs a sudden but imperceptible change of direction. The Maydān is orientated according to the four cardinal points, whereas Mecca lies to the south-west of Iṣfahān, so that the axis of the mosque, which is the *qiblah*, diverges from that of the gateway by some 45 degrees. The architect, faced by this change of direction imposed by circumstances, knew how to make the most of it; he used it to express the transition from the outward to the inward world, a swift reorientation of the soul. After the atrium there comes into view the great *īwān* which opens out, beyond the courtyard, onto the chamber of the *miḥrāb* and which has itself the shape of a very large prayer-niche: it prefigures the *miḥrāb*, without any doubt, but

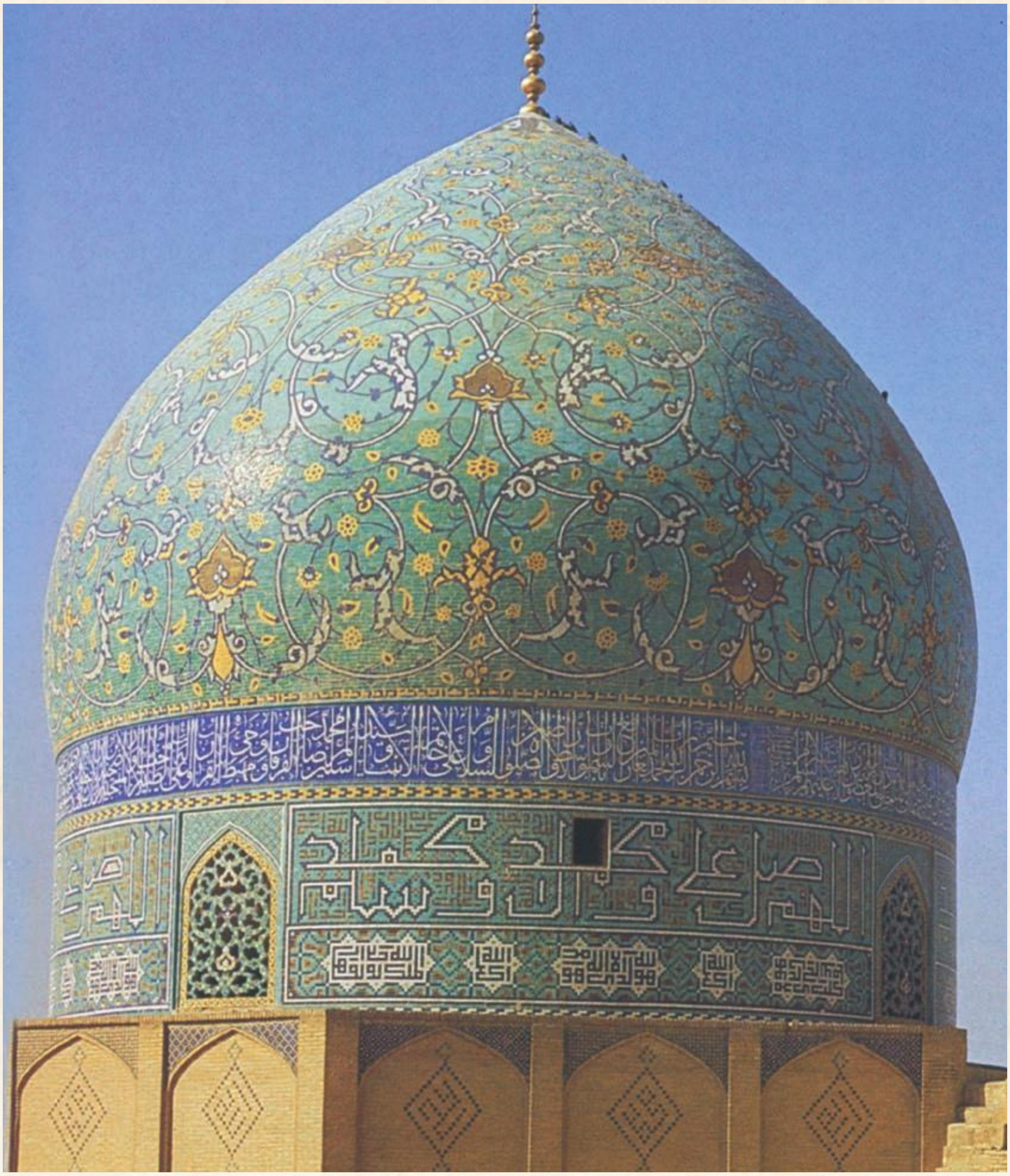
it does equally represent, in the most majestic fashion, the theme of the triumphal gateway. Its vault, which expands like a large sail fastened by string-like ribs, emerges onto a very broad framework, flanked by minarets, and forming a screen in front of the great turquoise cupola which it gradually conceals as one approaches it, as if it were something too sacred to be directly accessible.

In a certain sense, the *miḥrāb* is the gateway onto the unseen, and the *īwān* which stands before it is its face, while the gateway to the mosque summarizes the entire sanctuary, since the function of the sanctuary is precisely to be a gateway to the hereafter.

The rectangular courtyard of the Shāh Mosque is surrounded by arcades on two levels in the form of *īwāns*. In the middle of each side of the courtyard there is one large *īwān*; the two that lie on the axis of the *qiblah* correspond respectively to the entrance and the *miḥrāb* hall, and the two which lie on the transverse axis give access to smaller oratories. All these niches, great and small, repeat the keel-arch inscribed with subtle precision in a rectangular framework. The extreme sobriety of these forms is offset by the iridescent brilliance of the ceramics which cover all the visible surfaces of the building. In the total setting, it is no mere mosaic formed from pieces of hand-cut faience in the technique which gives such life to Timurid monuments; it is a case of painted ceramic tiles, which permits a great profusion of ornamentation but rejects contrasts in favor of a



243. Looking from the inner courtyard into the side courts of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān



244. Dome of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān

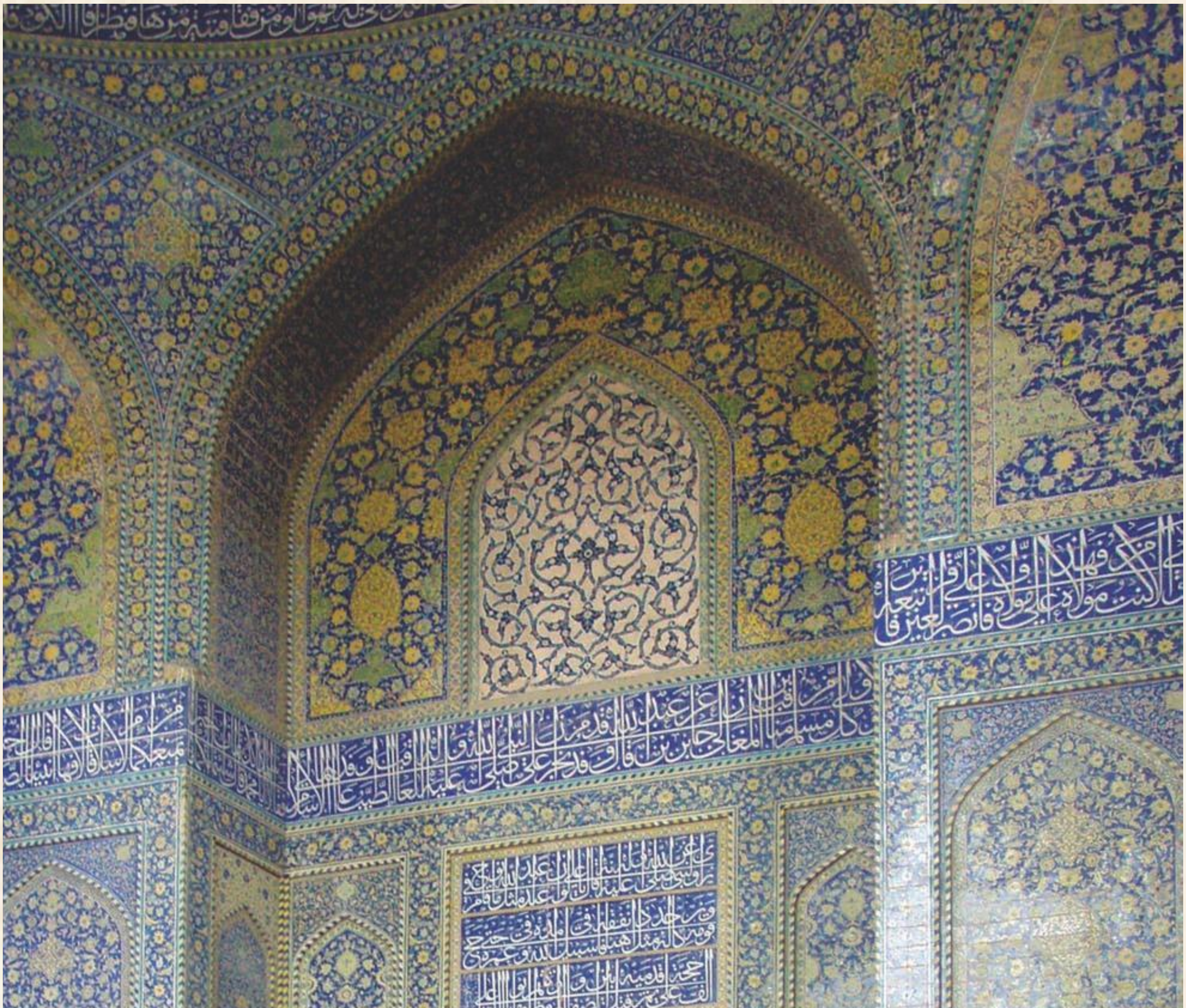
composed color scheme which moves between blue, green, and golden yellow.

The great dome over the hall of the *miḥrāb* rises above a round drum supported by a polygon with multiple surfaces on a square base. The roundness of the dome is made tangible by the joyful scrolls of arabesque adorning it, in contrast to the hieratic inscriptions in Thuluth and Kūfī script around the whole of the drum. The drum itself is not apparent from the interior, since the dome is constructed with a double crown in such a way that the inner vault does not extend to the very top of the dome. This inner vault rests upon eight keel arches which it embraces by a simple device of spherical facets. In this *miḥrāb* hall, as in the two "winter oratories"





Top and Bottom: **245-246**. Details of tile decoration in the cupolas of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān



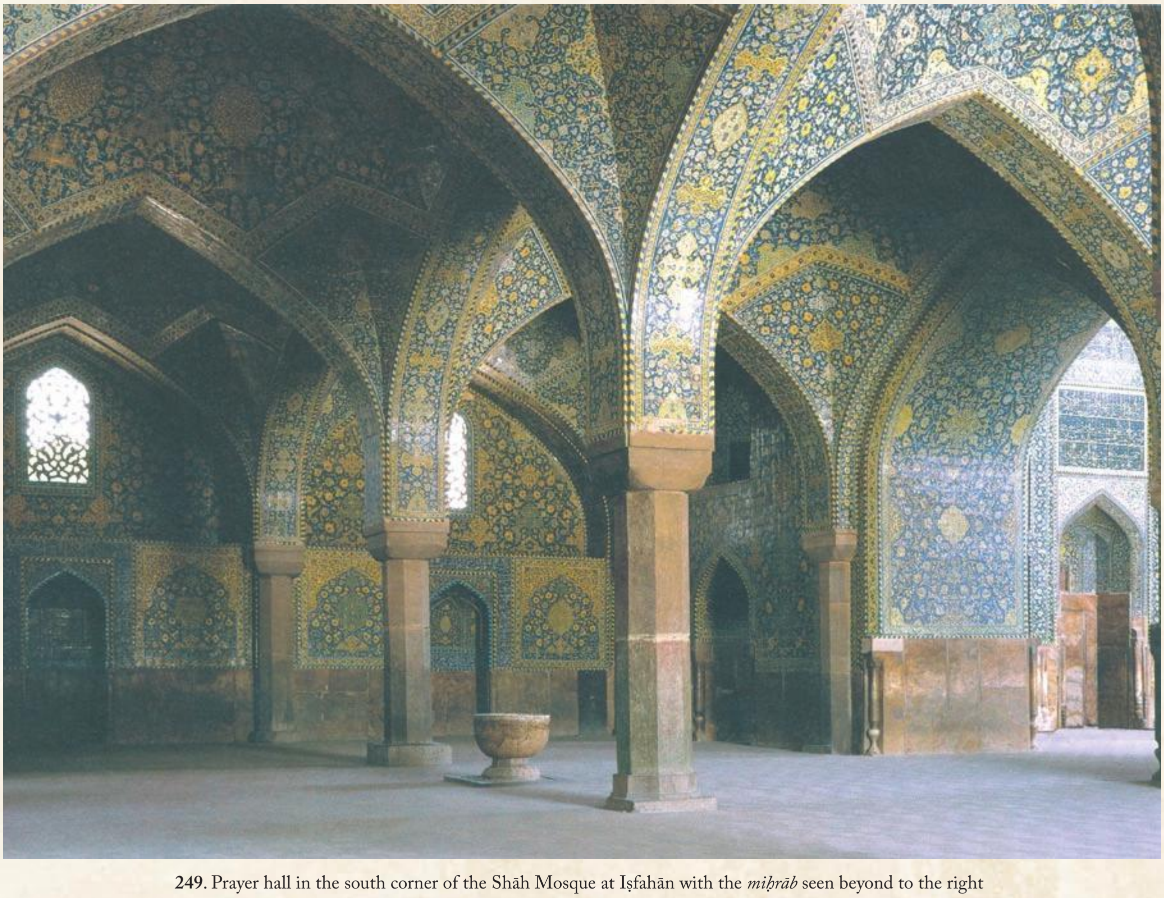
247. *Miḥrāb* of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān

which form its wings and which are crowned by cupolas on pillars, the Persian art of faceted vaulting achieves its most simple and elegant expression.

The total complex of the edifice, with its unified contours, includes not only the various oratories—the dome chamber, the two winter oratories, and those which match the smaller *īwāns*—but also two colleges (*madāris*) with their own courtyards. All these different parts of the complex are linked with one another by wide-open bays; from a covered, self-contained space, one passes directly to a space open to the sky; one is never shut in, and everywhere one is surrounded by a perfect architectural setting. It is this kind of space which distinguishes a mosque of the type we have just described from any Christian sanctuary, whatever other incidental resemblances they may have.



248. Detail of tile decoration from the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān

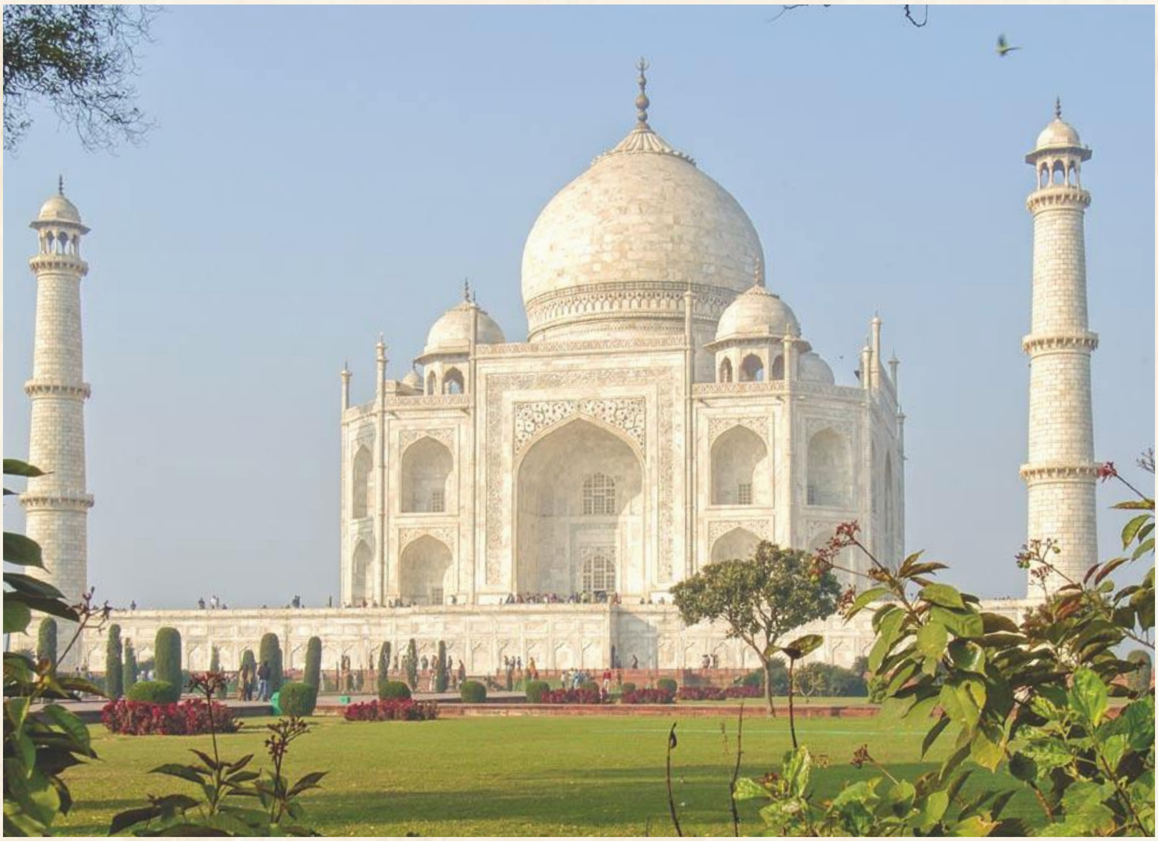


249. Prayer hall in the south corner of the Shāh Mosque at Iṣfahān with the *miḥrāb* seen beyond to the right

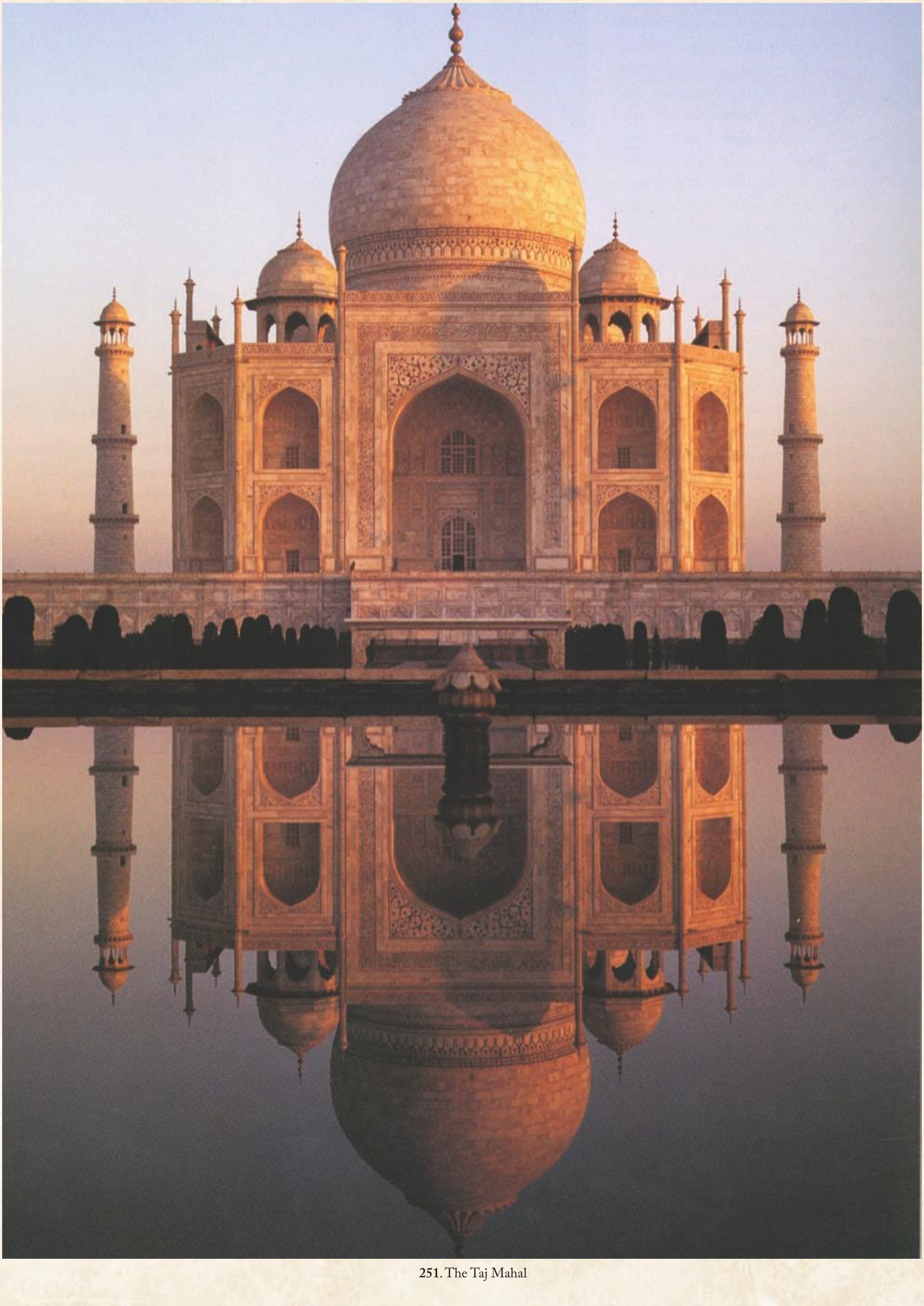
8 *The Taj Mahal*

The Taj Mahal, which is the masterpiece of Mughal art, apparently lies somewhere outside the art of Islam, or at least at its extreme limit, by reason of the motives underlying its construction, for it is a mausoleum sheltering the tomb of a woman whose glorification depends neither upon her sanctity nor upon her being of the lineage of the Prophet, but on the simple fact that she was greatly loved by her husband, the Emperor Shāh Jahān. But there are various coincidences which make of this work something more than an item outside the mainstream of Islamic art and a mere extravagance. The love of woman, or of womanhood as such in all the most profound aspects of her being, was bound to manifest itself somewhere in the art of Islam. Since she could not be portrayed by an image—and only a sacred image would be able to incarnate the quality in question—she found her expression by way of architecture, in a work that could be realized only in an Indian setting and whose purity and grace indisputably convey an aspect of femininity in the loftiest sense of the term. Moreover, it is no mere chance that the overall disposition of this mausoleum, and the dome in particular, should recall the typically Hindu motif of the lotus bud emerging from the water—a motif, or symbol, which is linked with the notion of femininity or primordial receptivity.

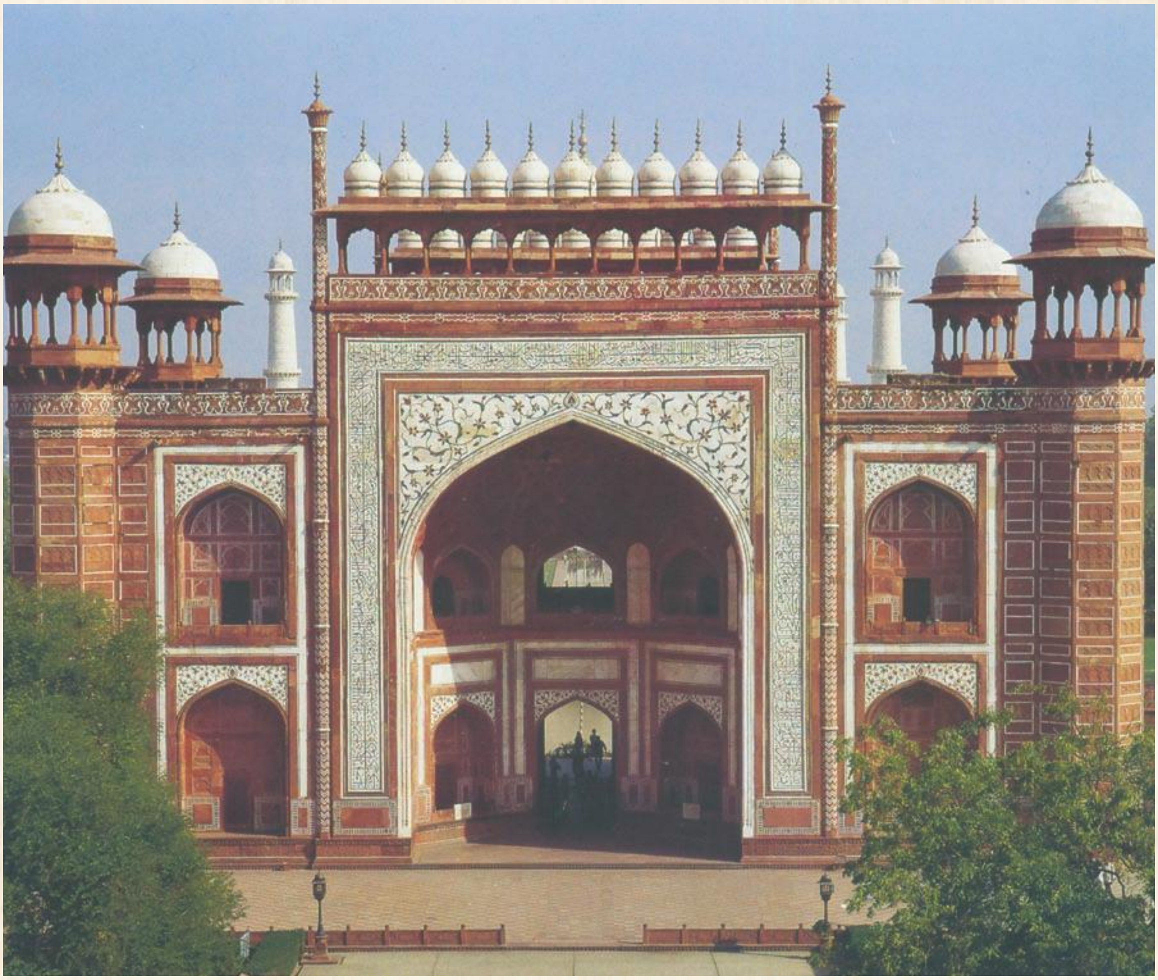
A further and, as it were, providential coincidence is the fact that a mausoleum has a certain affinity as an architectural type—not by the effect of some external influence but by its inner logic—with the fundamental theme of Hindu architecture, which is that of the sacred mountain covering the cavern in which there lies concealed the spark of divine light. In the same way, a mausoleum shelters a crypt, and this conceals a "seed of eternity". A Mus-



250. General view of the Taj Mahal, Agra, India



251. The Taj Mahal



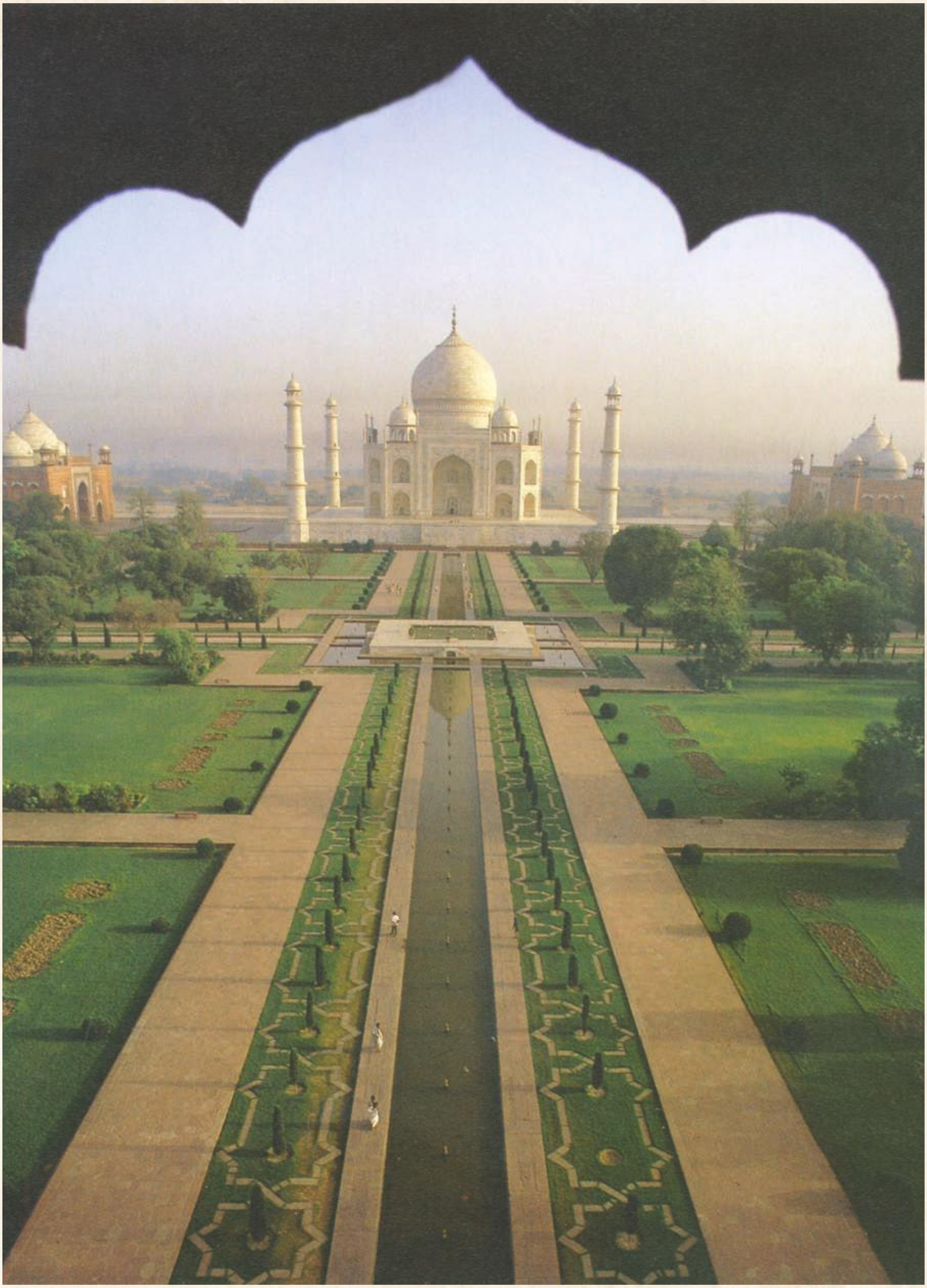
252. Main entrance to the Taj Mahal

lim mausoleum could not possibly be confused with a Hindu temple, but the parallel we have just touched upon not only evokes a certain spiritual dimension but also makes possible the transposition of a particular technique of building from Hindu to Islamic art, and we shall speak of this later.

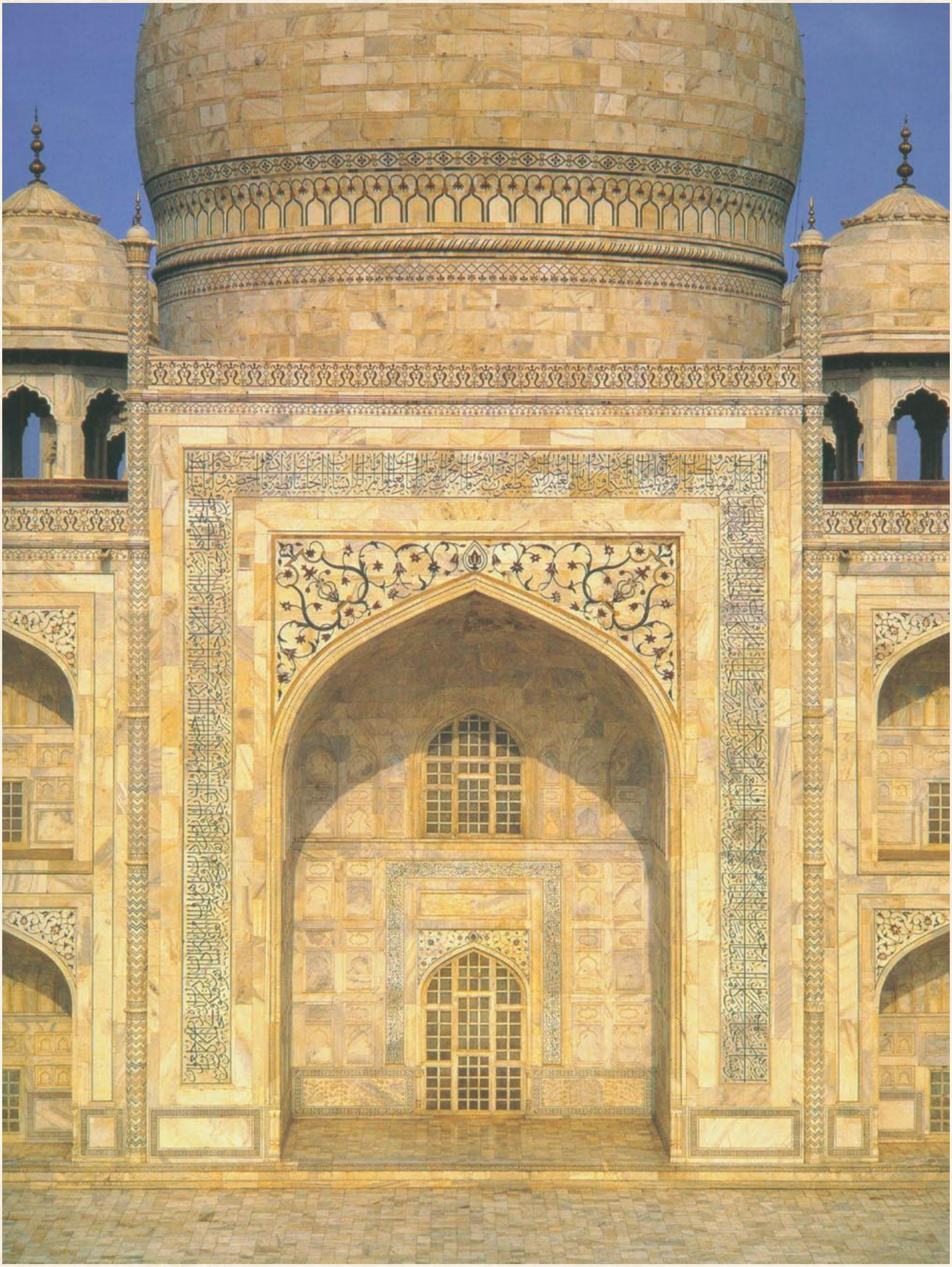
First of all, to give this mausoleum its place in history; Mumtāz-i-Maḥal, the beloved wife of Shāh Jahān, died in the year 1630, and her mausoleum was constructed between 1632 and 1654. The emperor chose a site on the banks of the river Jumna, with the intention of building his own mausoleum on the opposite bank and of joining the two by a bridge to portray a link that went beyond the "flow of time". In contrast to the Taj Mahal, which is faced in white marble, the mausoleum of the husband was to be paneled in black marble. Fate decreed that the second mausoleum should never be built and that the emperor should find his last resting-place by his wife's side.

The names of several architects who worked for Shāh Jahān are known, including a certain Mullā Murshīd of Shīrāz, but it has never been possible to discover who drew up the plans of the Taj Mahal. The emperor himself was fascinated by architecture and occasionally designed plans for his own buildings; he has, in any event, the merit of having selected the best project.

This had a series of precedents, including the mausoleum of Humāyūn, the second of the



253. The Taj Mahal and its gardens



254. Detail of the main entrance to the shrine of the Taj Mahal

Mughal emperors, who had been forced to accept exile to Persia and on his return, brought with him a number of Persian artists. It is not very surprising then that the Taj Mahal should derive from Persian models at the same time as drawing close to the legacy of Hindu architecture; as a synthesis, it is without peer.

The technique of construction, which is massive, doubtless owes much to Hindu usage. It is clear that the exterior of the Taj Mahal does not depend upon the organization of inner space but is somehow fashioned like sculpture. This is brought out in particular by the polygonal form of the building, the plan of which is a square with truncated corners—an irregular octagon—so that each of the four broader sides of the edifice assumes the aspect of a façade and at the same time invites the eye, by its receding corners, to explore what is beyond. This is not the least of all the contrasts this architecture involves and of which it is the miraculous synthesis.

The first of these contrasts is between the polygonal section of the building, with its corners accentuated by watchtower columns with their graceful summits, and the great dome infused with expansive force.

This cupola is shaped like a bulb or, more exactly, like the bud of a flower, whose outline rises above, and enhances, the ascendant movement of the *īwāns*, or niches distributed over the eight faces of the building. In order to make it clearly visible above the triumphal doorways, the cupola is supported on a high drum, whose massive appearance is balanced out by the weightless and ethereal shape of the four small satellite cupolas. They are, more strictly speaking, domed pavilions, inspired by—and not copied from—Hindu models.

But the richest and most forceful contrast enlivening this piece of architecture is that between the plastic rotundity of the dome and the cavities of the *īwāns* on the façades. These recesses are like vast caves of deep and heavy

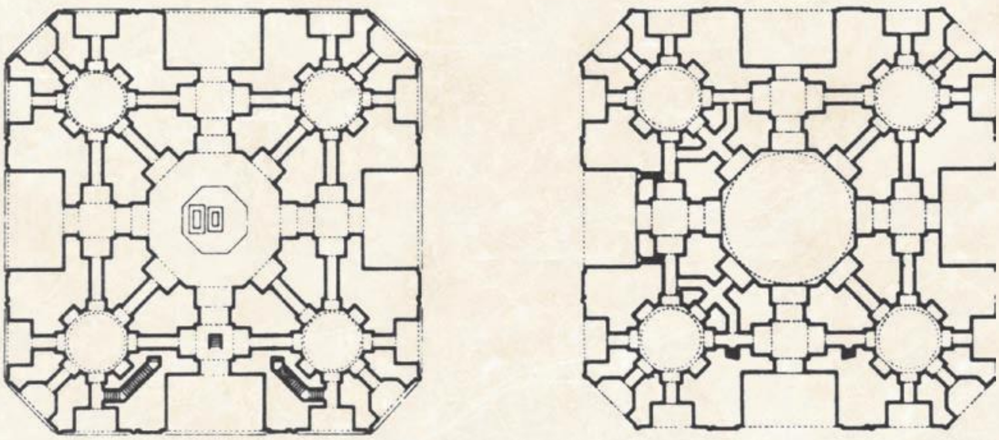


Figure 52: Plan of the Taj Mahal

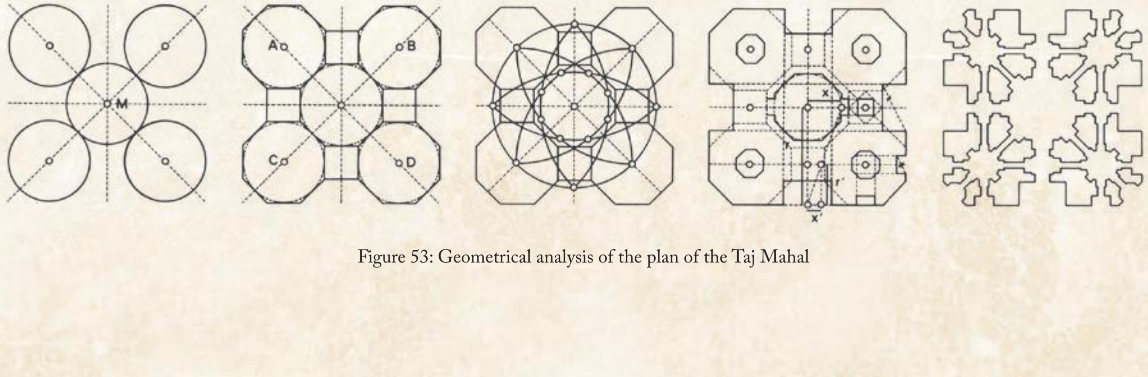


Figure 53: Geometrical analysis of the plan of the Taj Mahal



255. Funeral chamber of the Taj Mahal

shadow, whilst the dome draws down upon itself the full light of day. Without these shadowed niches, the full-bodied mass of the dome would be overpowering; these concave forms give it a kind of lift and recoil that make it as intangible, distant, and incorporeal as the stars.

In the recesses themselves, the heavy shadows are mellowed by the play of faceted surfaces which partition the vaults in a subtle and original design like that made on the surface of a pool by a sudden breath of wind.

In the evening, when the contrasts between light and shadow are softened, and the convex and concave shapes fade into one another and the ivory-white marble, with which the mausoleum is faced, glows with its own light, the Taj Mahal sheds all material heaviness; it then seems to be made of the same substance as the full moon.

The discreet and extremely delicate decorations—incrustations in marble of subtly different shades, flowers carved in relief, and a very elegant and self-confident inscription of verses from the Koran on the framework of the doors—do no more than heighten this impression of a unique substance of a celestial nature. We shall return later to this aspect of the work and its link with the traditional symbol of a celestial dome of "white pearl".

The interior of the building consists of a central funeral chamber, which shelters the cenotaphs of the illustrious pair, together with four side-chambers linked to each other and to the central chamber by corridors. In the entire ensemble, these spaces hollowed out of the compact mass of the edifice form a fairly complex scheme, comparable to snow-flakes piled together and explicable only in terms of the underlying geometrical arrangement of the whole building. This scheme consists of five equally sized octagons, all touching, and grouped in the shape of a rosette. Its determinative role reminds one of the *mandalas* which constitute the basic plans of Hindu temples, but the choice of octagons as the basic design and the fact that they are arranged in a group of five make it perfectly concordant with Muslim tradition. The existence of this scheme would be hardly suspected from the exterior of the building. It



256. Detail of inlaid decoration in the Taj Mahal

betrays itself however in the truncated outer corners, which match the end walls of the four peripheral octagons, and in the position of the four satellite cupolas each supported by eight pillars. The central dome marks out the guiding circle in which the central octagon is set.

We have not so far pointed out that the Taj Mahal is situated in a vast garden extending from the lofty river-bank, dominated by the mausoleum, to a monumental gateway. We shall not describe this gateway or the other buildings—a mosque and a guest-palace—which border this garden, but we shall concentrate our attention on the watercourses which mark the two cardinal axes of the garden. In a certain sense, the Taj Mahal, whose name signifies the "crown of the locality" (*tāj-i-maḥall*), should have been erected where the watercourses radiate out towards the four directions. In placing it—for some inexorable reason—next to the river Jumna and at the extreme end of the garden, two themes were discarded which, in the mind of the Emperor or the architect of the mausoleum, were doubtless one and the same. This theme derives from a celebrated *ḥadīth*, one of the descriptions of Paradise given by the Prophet. It evokes the image of an immense dome made of white pearl and supported by four corner-pillars on which are inscribed the four letters of the Divine Name "the All-Merciful" (*ar-Raḥmān*): R, Ḥ, M, N. From each of these letters there flows a river of grace.

In conformity with other traditions of the Prophet, the white pearl is the symbol of the substance from which the world was created. This is none other than the Universal Spirit or the First Intellect in its aspect of infinitely malleable or receptive substance, and that is in reality the supreme prototype of the nature of woman.



257. Detail of marble decoration in the Taj Mahal



Chapter VIII
The City

1 *Muslim Town-planning*

The subject of this chapter goes, in a sense, beyond the domain of art, since the city images the whole life of the community; but this very fact will enable us to give the arts their role in the context of social life. Moreover, town-planning is an art in itself, whether as expressing the will of a single individual—notably the sovereign who is a builder of cities—or of a group of individuals, very often anonymous, acting in pragmatic fashion but always in the framework of tradition—and this allows us to speak of "Muslim town-planning"—this tradition being no more than an application of the *Sunnah*, the custom of the Prophet, to the conditions of the locality and the period. Rather than governmental or royal town-planning, it is that of the group that will reveal the architectural constants in the cities of Islam. We shall start, nevertheless, with a brief survey of town-planning by sovereigns, the merits and demerits of which are highly instructive in the context of our subject.

The two most ancient examples of royal town-planning in Islam are Anjar in the Lebanon, built at the beginning of the eighth century A.D. by an Umayyad prince, and the first Baghdad, constructed in the second half of the same century by the Abbasid Caliph al-Manṣūr; they represent two entirely different, not to say opposing, types of city. Anjar is an example of the rectangular city surrounded by a fortified enclosure with four gates corresponding to each of the cardinal points, north, south, east and west, and giving access to two main thoroughfares which cross at the town-center according to the well-known scheme of Roman cities with their two axes, the *cardo* and the *decumanus*, from which the entire town-plan derives by simple fourfold division. In the ruins of this town—it did not long survive—there can be recognized the foundations of a mosque near the intersection of the main thoroughfares and next to it, a little farther back, those of the governor's palace, the *dār al-imārah*. The two main avenues were flanked by colonnades, which emphasizes the Greco-Roman character of the whole, but behind the colonnades were rows of shops whose stone bases still remain to suggest the market-streets (*sūq* or *bāzār*) of later Muslim cities.

The earliest city of Baghdad, which has completely disappeared but of which we have fairly exact descriptions, was a perfectly circular city, enclosed in a double wall, with the residential quarters laid out in the form of a ring and the streets fanning out from the center. In the middle of this ring and in the center of a green space were situated the Caliph's palace and the great mosque. Four fortified gates, giving access

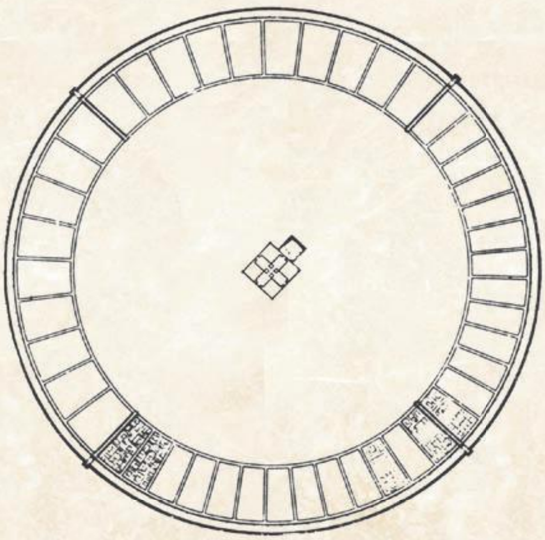


Figure 54: Plan of the round city of al-Manṣūr, Baghdad

Opposite: **258**. View of the city of Fez, Morocco, and the Qarawiyyīn Mosque

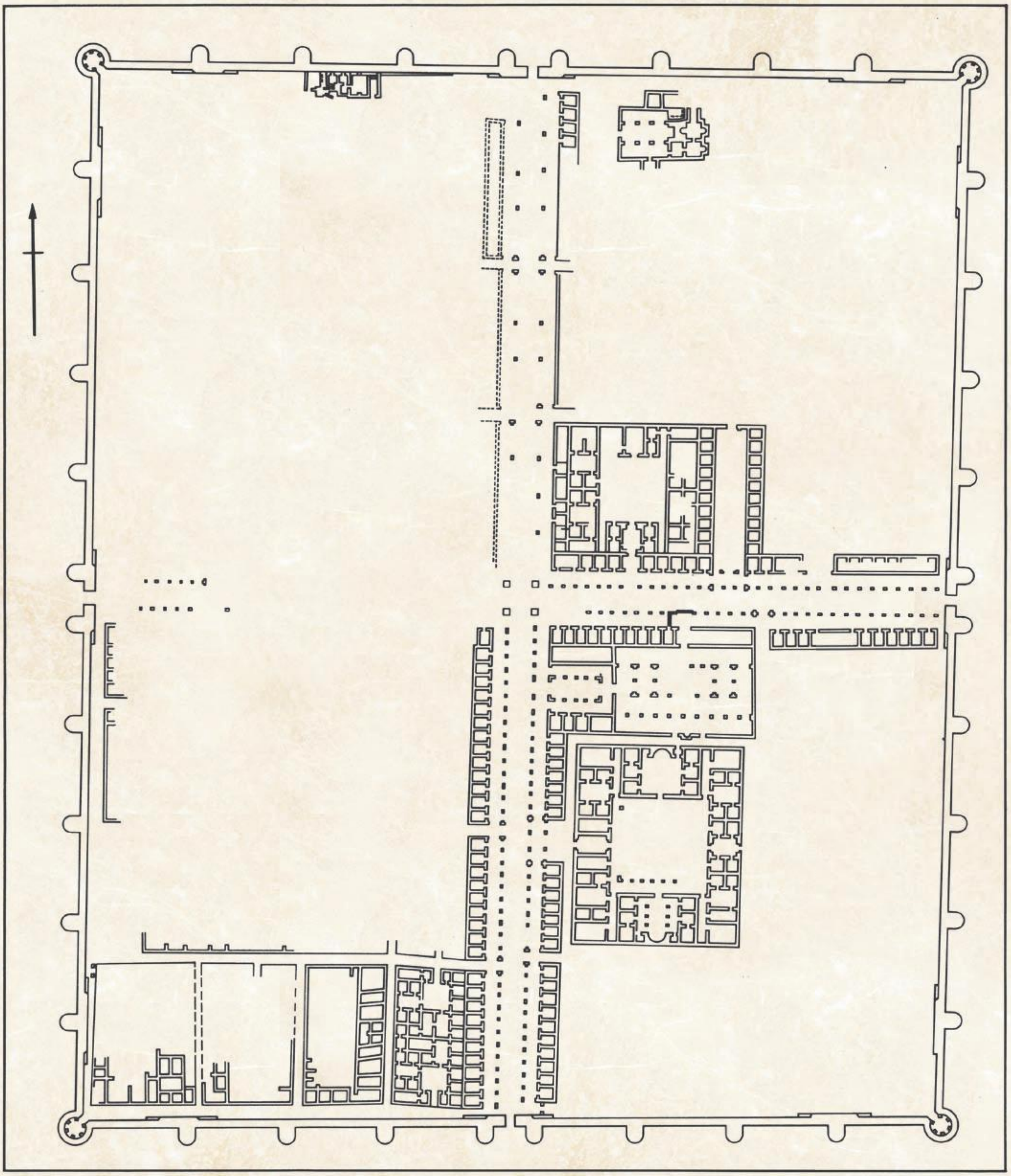


Figure 55: Plan of Anjar

to four main arteries, faced south-east, south-west, north-east and north-west.

The square and the circular city not only reflect different lifestyles but are implicitly associated with two diverse conceptions of the universe, for town-planning never fails to involve cosmology. The city is always an image of totality; its form shows the way man integrates himself into the universe. The square city, laid out along the cardinal axes, is an expression of sedentary life and also of a static image of the universe, whereas the circular city, which derives from a dynamic conception of the world, is a kind of reflection of nomadism on the plane of urban life which, as such, is sedentary. Circular cities existed, moreover, among the Medes and Parthians, Iranian people who had passed from nomadism to sedentarism, and their prototypes were quite clearly nomad camps with their circle of tents and the chieftain's tent in the center.

Neither of these two types of city was readily acceptable to the Muslim community. In the long run, the plan of the Roman city, which lies below the surface of many Muslim towns in the Near East, was always modified by retaining no more than a part of the four-square alignment of streets, particularly as commercial quarters, while ordinary dwelling places came to be grouped quite differently by somehow avoiding the traffic-routes, according to a law which we shall explain below. The circular city of al-Manṣūr had in fact to be abandoned as the result of tensions engendered by its excessively centralized and totalitarian form. Friction between the town's people and the Turkish bodyguard obliged the Abbasid Caliphs to abandon Baghdad and to found Sāmarrā as a royal city detached from the civil and commercial town. After this, it became almost the rule in the Islamic world to keep the two categories apart. When a sovereign took possession of a capital, he set up his residence outside the walls in order to maintain his freedom of action and to interfere as little as possible in the collective life of the town. Thus, the Umayyads of Spain founded the royal city of Madīnat az-Zahrāʾ outside Córdoba, the Marinids on becoming masters of Morocco in the mid-thirteenth century A.D. built the royal city of Fās al-Jadīd (New Fez) next to the ancient capital, and the Mughal emperor Akbar had Fatehpur Sikri erected some distance from Agra—to mention only a few examples still much in evidence today, for in most cases the royal city finished by becoming the nucleus of a new commercial town.

In itself, the royal city emerges as an extension of the sovereign's palace. It comprises living-quarters, gardens, barracks, and even artists' workshops and markets, all laid out according to plans drawn up by the court architects, whereas the commercial town—which may be a university town at the same time, and contain a royal castle without being the sovereign's permanent residence—develops in a somewhat pragmatic fashion but hardly ever with any interference in the way of town-planning by the sovereign.

The basic shape of the palace is no different from that of a house which, in Arab and Persian lands, is a rectangular structure around an inner court. This rectangle may well consist entirely of dwellings opening out onto the court; it may equally be two blocks of living-quarters facing one another and joined by enclosing walls. In the latter case, the courtyard is frequently lengthened to become an enclosed garden or is transformed into a reception court between one porch-house and another containing an audience-room.

It will be seen that these elements lend themselves to the development of symmetrical spaces dominated by large axes. In practice, however, axial orientation was reserved for courtyards and reception-halls alone; for the rest, sovereigns had no objection to breaking up axial and symmetrical alignments in order to create their own private residential quarters. A very typical example of this is provided by the little royal city of the Alhambra at Granada; the various complexes of which it is composed, the Mashwar, the Court of Myrtles, and the Lion Court, fit very well into the symmetrical plans



259. The Alhambra, Granada, Spain



260. Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, India

we have just described, but between these clearly designed spaces there are breaks of continuity, changes of axis, and indirect approaches, which can only be intentional and doubtless mark off degrees of privacy.

There are certain ancient towns which were Islamicized by implanting new centers of religious and social life inside them, such as mosques and covered markets or the architectural complexes known as *kulliyāt*, which constitute little cities in themselves which would quite naturally gather around them fresh cells of urban growth. The most striking example of Islamicization of this kind is without doubt Istanbul, the layout of which recalls the ancient Byzantine capital while the city's unforgettable skyline is dominated by the domes and minarets of the great mosques which, surrounded by their *kulliyāt*, crown the heights.

It happens far more rarely that a Muslim city, having grown up, as it were, of itself and in answer to its inhabitants' immediate needs, should then be fitted out by a monarch as his capital and place of residence, and its plan modified by the creation of new avenues punctuated by monumental edifices. One example of this is the Samarqand of the Timurids and another is Safavid Iṣfahān. Since these are contemporary with the great town-planning projects of Baroque art, there is some temptation to see a parallel here, or even European influence. But Muslim town-planning remains alien to the sort of scene-setting that characterizes Baroque absolutism with its perspectives designed to give the feeling of extended vistas over which a progressive conquest has been achieved. Eloquent testimony to the difference between them is provided by the Shāh Mosque (*Masjid-i-Shāh*) at Iṣfahān, which unfolds its lofty gateway over the arena, or Maydān, but whose oratory can be reached only at the end of a corridor



261. General view of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey



262. Aerial view of the Shāh Mosque in Iṣfahān



263. The Registan Square, Samarqand, Uzbekistan

which shields it from the axial perspective of the great monumental square.

The first measure of town-planning which devolves upon a kingly builder of cities is the choice of a site. This site is determined essentially by the availability of water. The hydraulic works realized by founders of Muslim cities are legion: aqueducts bringing water from afar, catchments into which water settles, underground canals for water percolation (*qaṭṭārah*, *qanāh*), rain-water cisterns, and even the distribution of water from a whole river to a town on a slope. It is water, more than any other factor, which determines Muslim town-planning, since it is both the safeguard of life and the indispensable element in ritual ablutions. It is not therefore surprising that Islamic architecture should love ornamental water-jets, fountains, and reflecting surfaces of water, which give peace to both the mind and the senses.

A second measure of town-planning was to ensure the security of roads communicating with other urban centers. To this end, certain sovereigns, like the Seljuks of Asia Minor and the Safavid Shāh ʿAbbās I of Persia, built halting places in the form of fortified caravanserais.

A third measure, which could only depend upon the king, was to fortify the city.

Finally, it was expected of monarchs to endow a city with such public buildings as mosques, colleges, hospitals, caravanserais, and bath-houses. This was a duty of princes and their due, but not their privilege, for citizens with sufficient wealth could do the same, the co-ordination of town-planning initiatives from "above" and "below" being assured by the traditional institution of *awqāf* or *ḥubus*, religious foundations which enable any kind of private property—buildings, land, or wells—to be constituted as inalienable public estate, either by assigning them directly to the use of the public as in the case of a mosque or hospital or by reserving their revenues for the upkeep of a sanctuary, college, or any other institution of social utility. The works of town-planning realized by monarchs such as, for example, the construction of an aqueduct or a university, and the charitable foundations of an ever-increasing number of citizens all combine to form a patrimony belonging to everyone and at the same time shielded from the whims of individuals if not from occurrences of *force majeure*. It thus comes about that a considerable section, a quarter or even half of a city, can be transformed into common property.

This institution goes back to the advice given by the Prophet to ʿUmar when he wished to give up one of his lands in the form of charity; the Prophet said, "Make this field inalienable, and bestow its crops upon the poor". It is incontestably the most direct expression, on the urban level, of the community spirit of Islam. It makes a powerful contribution to the historical continuity of a town, to the maintenance of public works of benefit to all and sometimes, paradoxically enough, to the immunity of ruins in the center of the town.

In towns not made to any plan but simply as the result of "spontaneous" growth, the unity of the whole is guaranteed by the perfect homogeneity of form of its constituent elements, and this gives these towns an aspect as of crystals swept together—regular shapes in various sizes and combinations. This homogeneity is none other than the architectural expression of tradition, that is, of the *Sunnah* of the Prophet adapted to regional conditions. It is by determining the most simple and most ordinary of human activities, such as how to wash, to sit on the ground, to eat together around a single platter, to behave in the family and towards the stranger, that the *Sunnah* indirectly fashions clothing, the home, and the town. It includes in particular the rules of neighborliness, to which we shall return, and which relate, like all examples given by the Prophet, to concrete and precise situations.



264. The city of Mulay Idrīs, Morocco



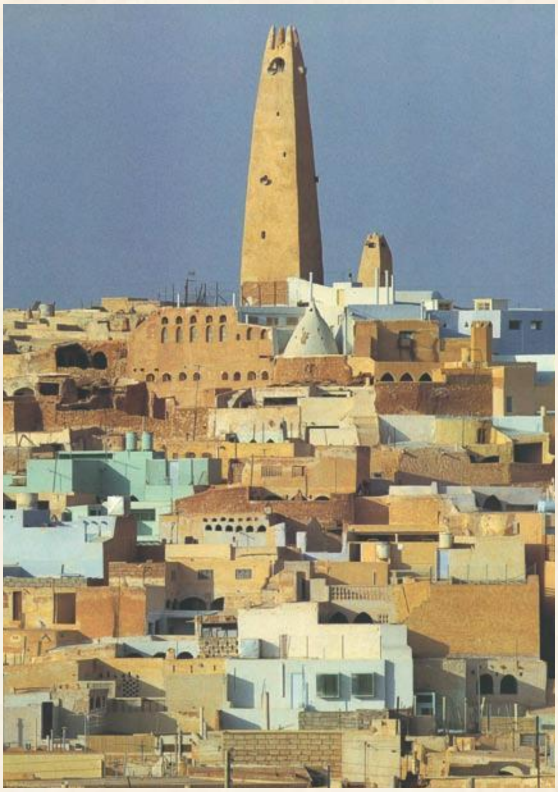
265. The city of Ṣanʿāʾ, Yemen

What is ordained by the *Sunnah* appears to concern only outward activities but these implicitly never fail to devolve upon the whole man, who is at once body, soul, and spirit.

It is this which gives Muslim town-planning in its most general form its both realist and spiritual character; it responds to material requirements but never treats them apart from exigencies of a higher order, and this distinguishes it essentially from modern town-planning, which tends to dissociate man's bodily, psychic, and spiritual needs and cannot, moreover, do otherwise, since it has no guiding principle to which to refer to bring these different domains together.

A particularly striking example of what we mean is the role played by water in what we might term the economy, both material and spiritual, of the Muslim city, water being, moreover, a kind of image of the soul in its fluidity and purity.

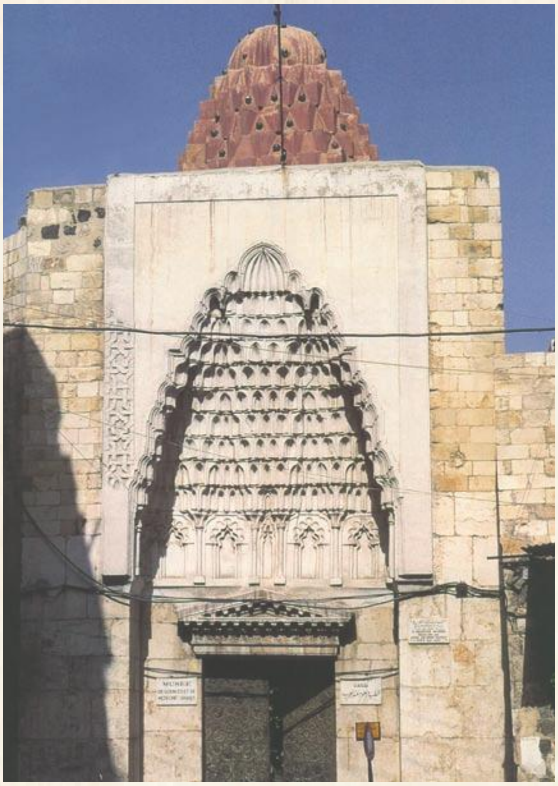
A general and enduring characteristic of Islamic town-planning, and one which derives directly from the *Sunnah*, is that the commercial



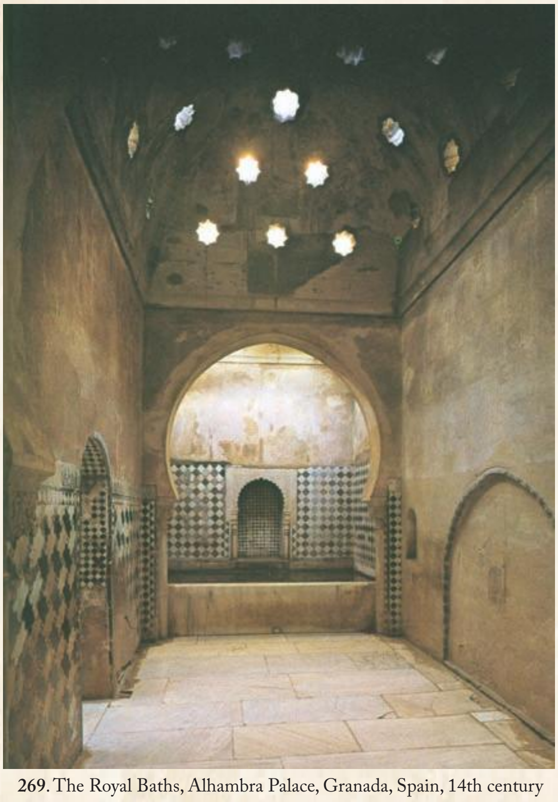
266. The city of Ghardaïa, Algeria



267. The Bāb Bardain, Meknes, Morocco



268. Hospital founded by Nūr ad-Dīn in Damascus, 1160



269. The Royal Baths, Alhambra Palace, Granada, Spain, 14th century

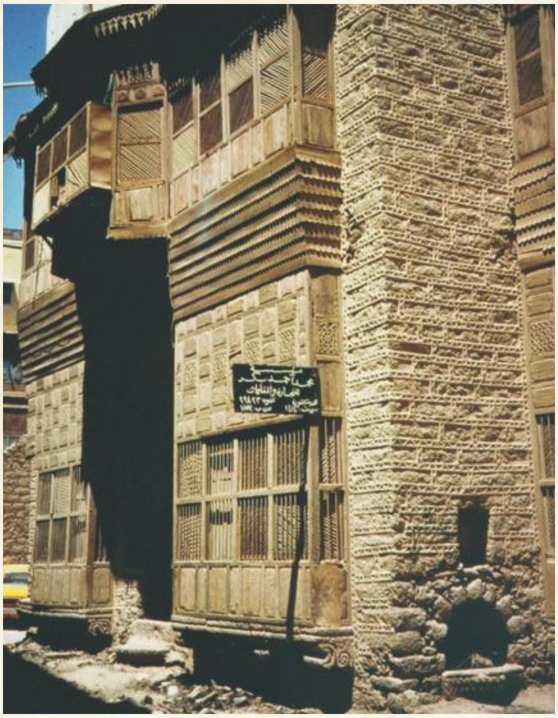
and residential areas are kept strictly apart. The vital artery of a Muslim town is its market (*sūq* or *bāzār*), which spreads out along the road or roads joining the town to other centers of commerce. This artery attracts almost every kind of gainful activity, crafts as well as commerce, since the two are often one; most craftsmen sell their products on the spot. But dwellings are, for preference, situated well out of reach of the market and traffic roads, and are accessible for the most part only through narrow, winding alleyways, the function of which is in no way comparable to the streets of European towns, even mediaeval ones, because Muslim houses take their light and air from their own inner courts and not from the street outside.

If one looks at the plan of a Muslim town, one finds, next to the avenues cutting through the city, a series of cul-de-sacs of labyrinthine complexity; these are the alleyways or corridors giving access to each of the dwellings piled together in a compact mass. Houses lean one against the other at the same time as being insulated from their neighbors, self-contained, and open to the sky.

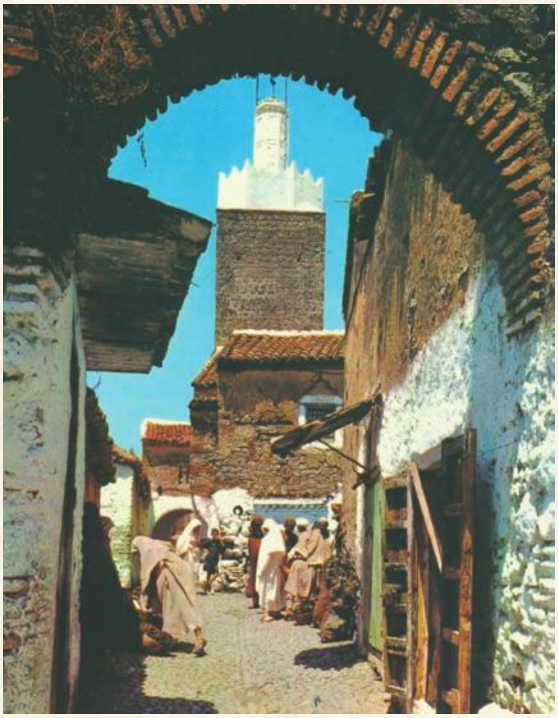
This type of urban texture is found in particular in such places as North Africa, Egypt, Syria, and Iran, where the great differences between the daytime and night-time temperatures allow colder air to accumulate as it falls, quite naturally, into the well-like interior of the inner courts. These frequently have an arcaded cloister, the terrace of which leads to the upper rooms. In such countries as Southern Arabia and in certain districts of India, where it is a question of leaving houses open to the cool breezes which blow in regularly from the sea, domestic architecture is different; and the same is true of Turkey where the climate is harsher. However, the isolation of each dwelling is maintained; the wind-cooled house is provided with screens made of rods of turned wood, which soften the glare and allow the inhabitants to look out without being seen. The traditional Turkish house is frequently articulated in a U-shape, with one section built back from



270. The Khāju Bridge over the Zayāndeh river, Iṣfahān, Persia



271. An old street in Medina, Saudi Arabia



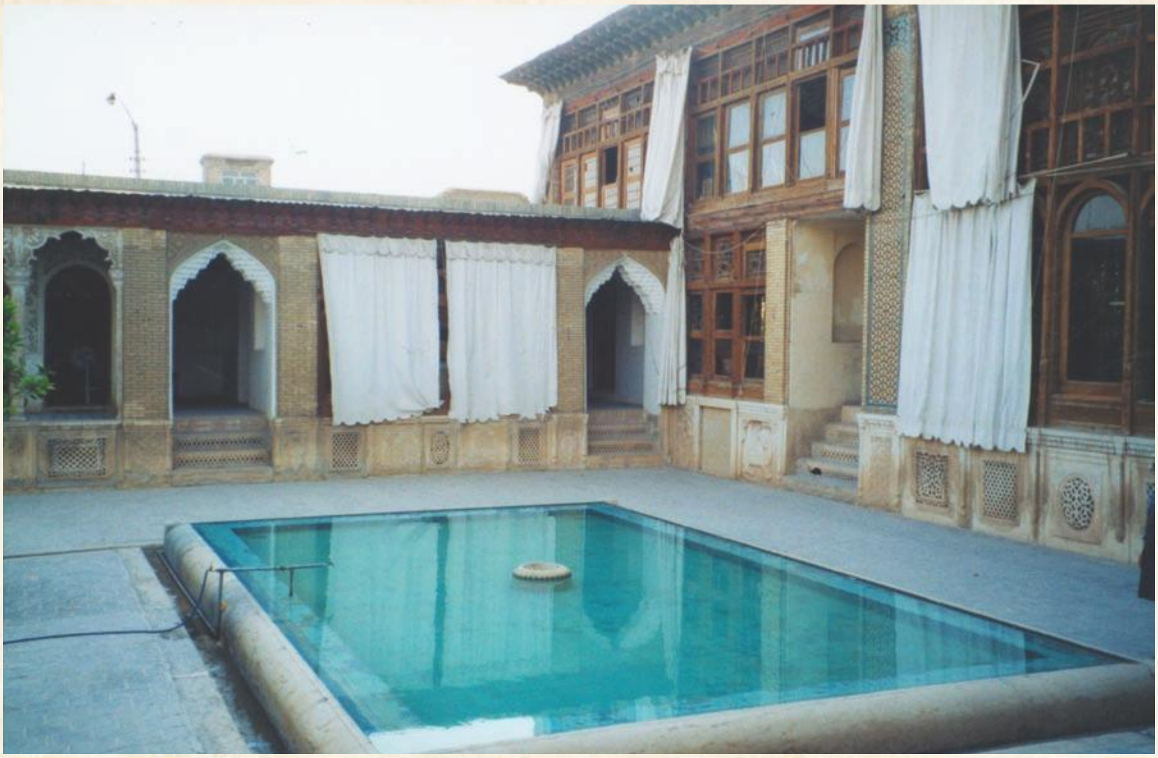
272. A street in Chefchaouen, Morocco

the rest, and its windows opening out onto an enclosed space. If possible, it is surrounded by a garden, itself enclosed within walls, which are bordered by the same narrow, closed alleys as in Arab towns. Old Istanbul resembled a cluster of villages with wooden houses, over which towered the great mosques and their *kulliyāt* in dressed stone.

In every case, the dwelling-house is a veritable *sacratum* (*ḥaram*) which may not be violated; it is the domain of woman, whom Islam tends to insulate from public and communal

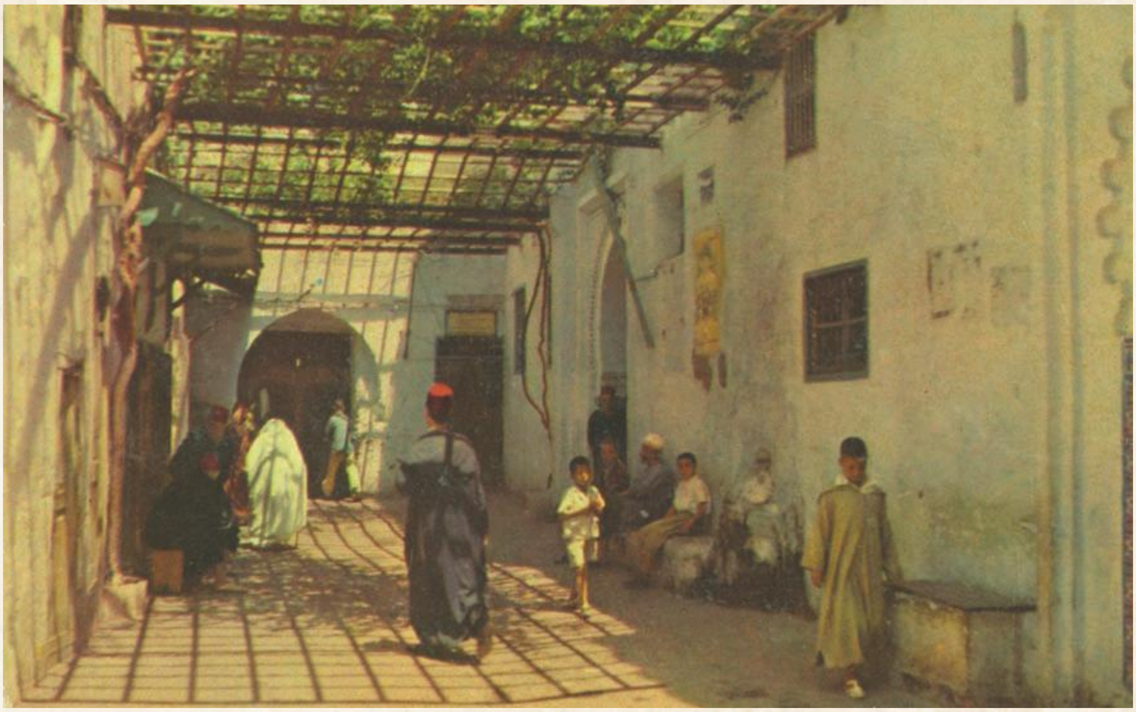


273. Courtyard of Bayt al-Suḥaymi, an Ottoman house in Cairo, 1648-1796

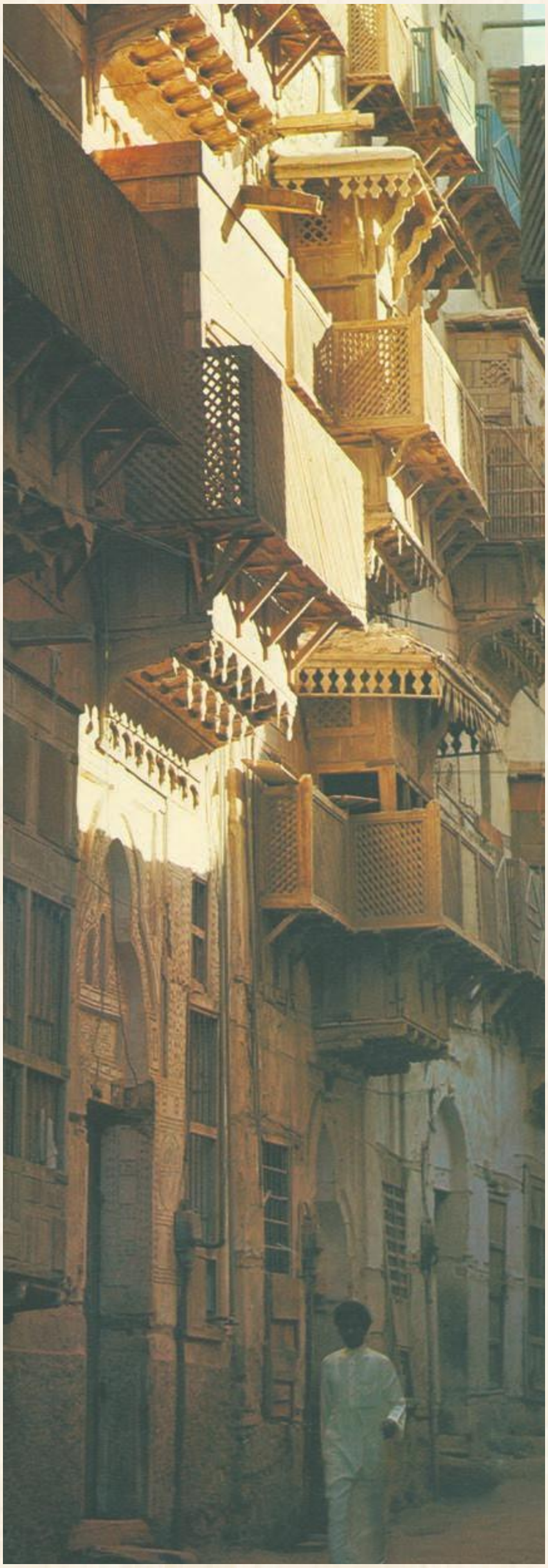


274. Courtyard of a traditional house in Shīrāz, Persia

life, thus protecting her from her own curiosity and that of others. Woman is the image of the soul (*nafs*) in the double aspect of her passionate nature and her nobility of substance, receptive to "Exhalations of the Divine". The predominance in woman of the pole of the "soul" over that of the "intellect" means that her very body is in some way an integral part of the soul; this soul is closer to the body than is the relatively more intellectual soul of the male. In return, woman's body is more subtle, more delicate, more "fluid", and nobler than man's. It is not by reason of her purely physical, sexual characteristics—in this respect impersonal and collective—that the Muslim woman veils herself, although this does correspond to a certain social opportuneness; it is because her physical appearance in some way sets forth her soul. The bride unveiling her beauty to the bridegroom is, for the sensibility of the Muslim, an image which evokes not only inebriety of the senses but every intoxication whose surge abandons the hardened shores of the outer world to flow towards inward limitlessness; for the mystic, it is the image *par excellence* of the contemplation of God. In the spiritual economy of Muslim life, woman represents the "inward" side (*bāṭin*) whereas the public life of a man, his profession, travels, and warfare, represent his "outward" side (*ẓāhir*). A Muslim will never speak of his wife in the society of men not related to him and, when in the company of his wife, will never speak of his business affairs unless it be some matter which concerns her personally. It is true that these rules and customs are not observed with the same rigor in all ethnic and social milieux. We are expounding them here in their most unqualified aspect in order to explain what a Muslim's private abode means to him. If his house has no windows onto the street and is normally built around an inner court from which the rooms receive light and air, this is not simply in response to the frequently torrid climate of Muslim lands; it is clearly symbolic. In conformity with this symbolism, the inner court of a house is an image of paradise; when it contains a fountain and watercourses which gush forth to water trees and flowers, it does in effect recall the descriptions in the Koran of the abode of the blessed.



275. Usáa yard, Tetuán, Morocco


276. Old houses in Medina, Saudi Arabia

It is said that the four-square arrangement of rooms around a central courtyard reflects the fact that a Muslim may marry as many as four wives. In this case, each wing of the house must constitute a separate dwelling, for each of his wives is entitled to equal treatment; she must be able to receive her husband in her own home, and he must be the guest in turn of each of his several wives according to strictly formulated rules or, more exactly, according to the Prophet's example whose fairness and generosity to his wives is the model to be emulated. Nothing is more false than the picture of promiscuity and sexual laxness evoked in the mind of the average European by the term *harem.* Because Christianity prescribes monogamy, not in virtue of a "law of nature"—the contours of which are in reality quite different—but for the sake of a certain asceticism and because of the symbolical value of a single-minded love, the Christian easily concludes, by a kind of protective instinct, that it is impossible actually to love several wives and that polygamy cannot work unless love be brought down to the purely animal level. The truth is that if love is not to fall into decline and if it is to surpass in principle the passions of the ego, it requires a sacred ordinance, and this must necessarily vary according to the various religions, in accordance with their different spiritual economies and by reason of the natural predispositions for which they cater.

Let us also note that every married man is the *imām* of his family, which amounts to saying that the family is a relatively autonomous unit, both social and religious. This is reflected directly in architecture. Seen from the outside, individual houses are hard to distinguish from one another within the built-up mass; they often disappear almost entirely since most of their outer walls are shared with other houses. Seen from the inside, however, they are practically autonomous cells.

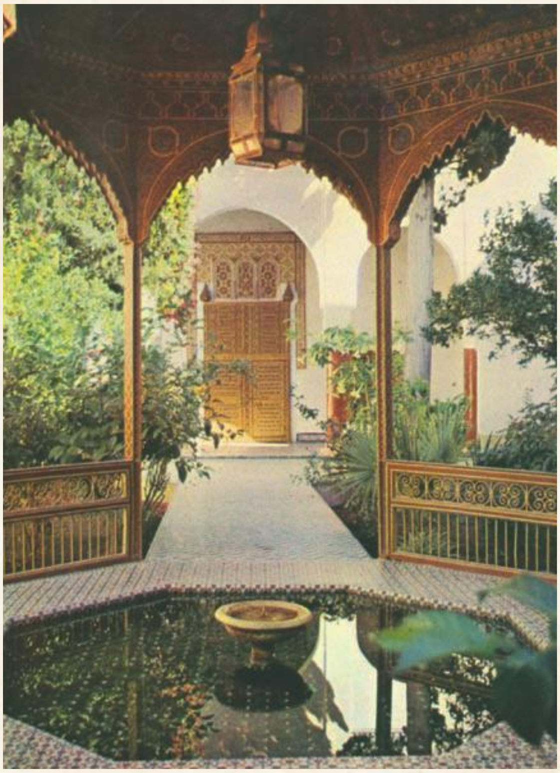
According to the words of the Prophet, no one should prevent his neighbor from fixing a beam into the outer wall of his house, but nei-



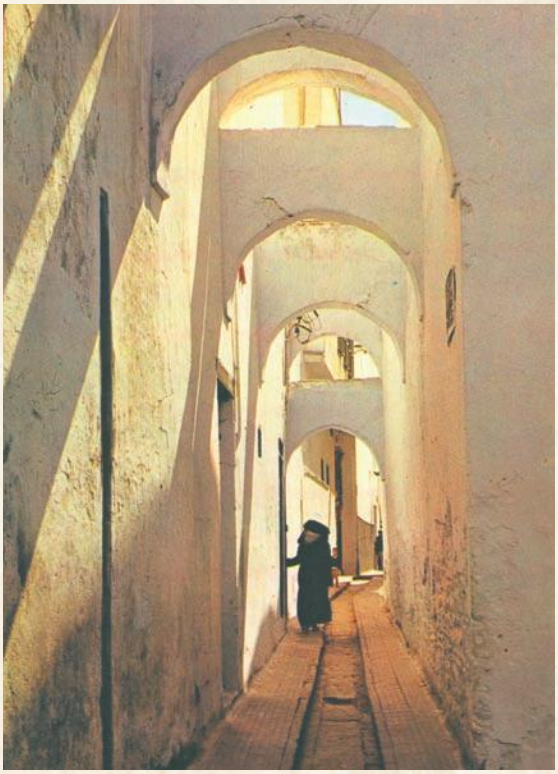
277. Old street in Asilah, Morocco



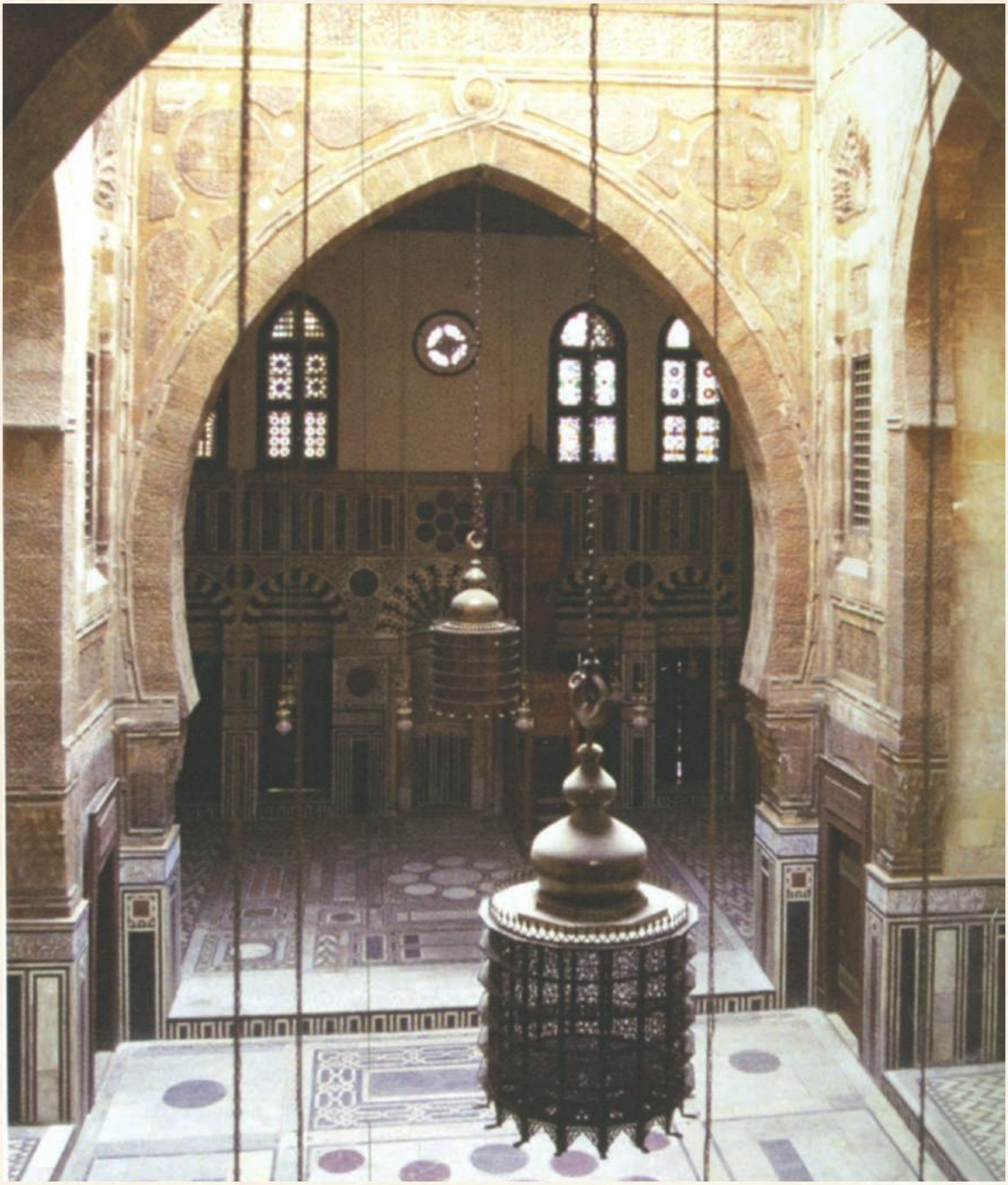
278. Façade of Bayt Aḥmad Katkhudā al-Razzāz, a Mamluk house in Cairo



279. Inner courtyard of the Bahia Palace, Marrakesh, Morocco



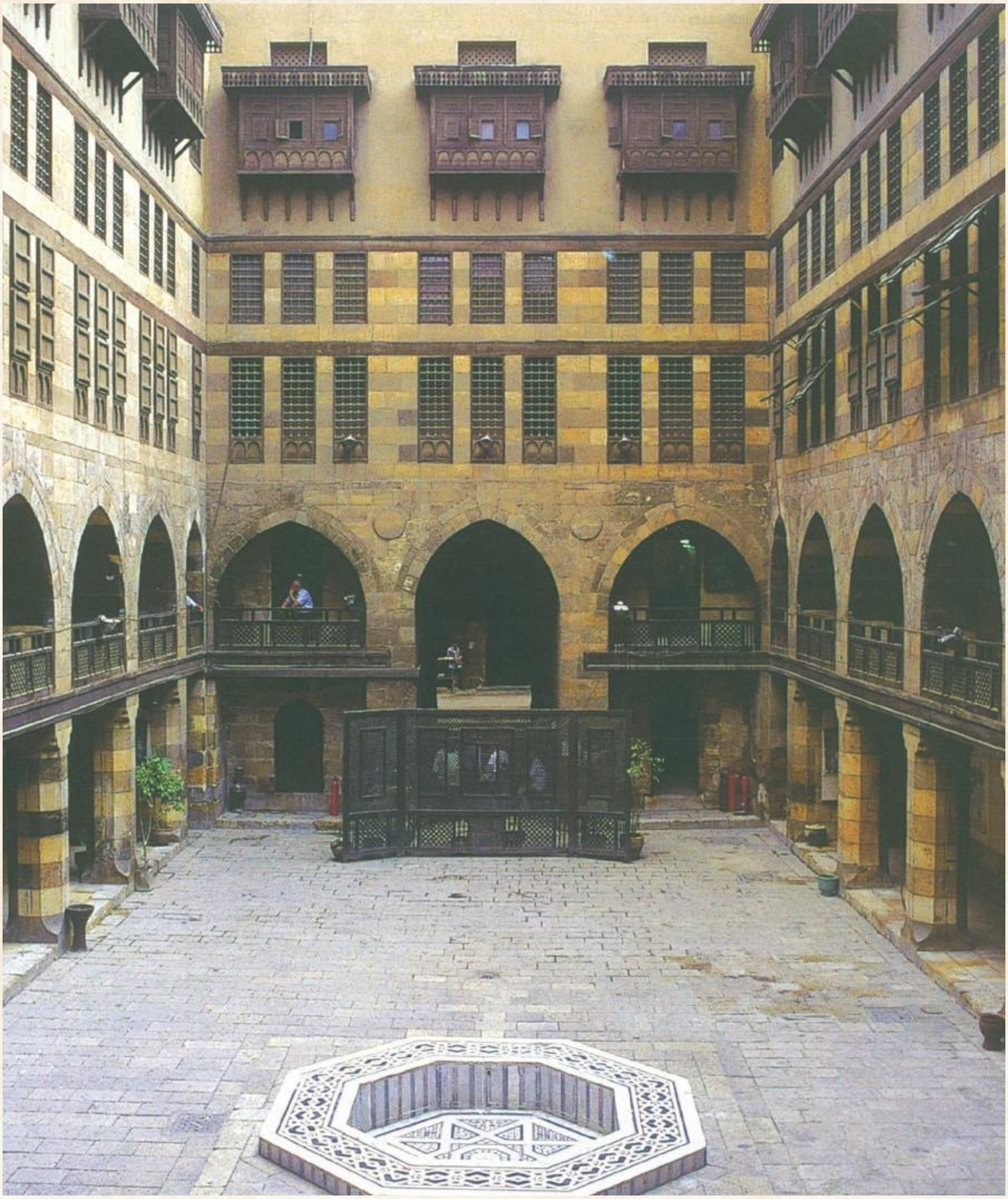
280. Alley in the medina quarter of Rabat, Morocco



281. Interior of al-Ghūrī Madrasah, Cairo, Egypt, an example of a living *madrasah*

ther should anyone build in such a way as to overlook his neighbor's courtyard. Neighbors' rights thus cover both interdependence and privacy.

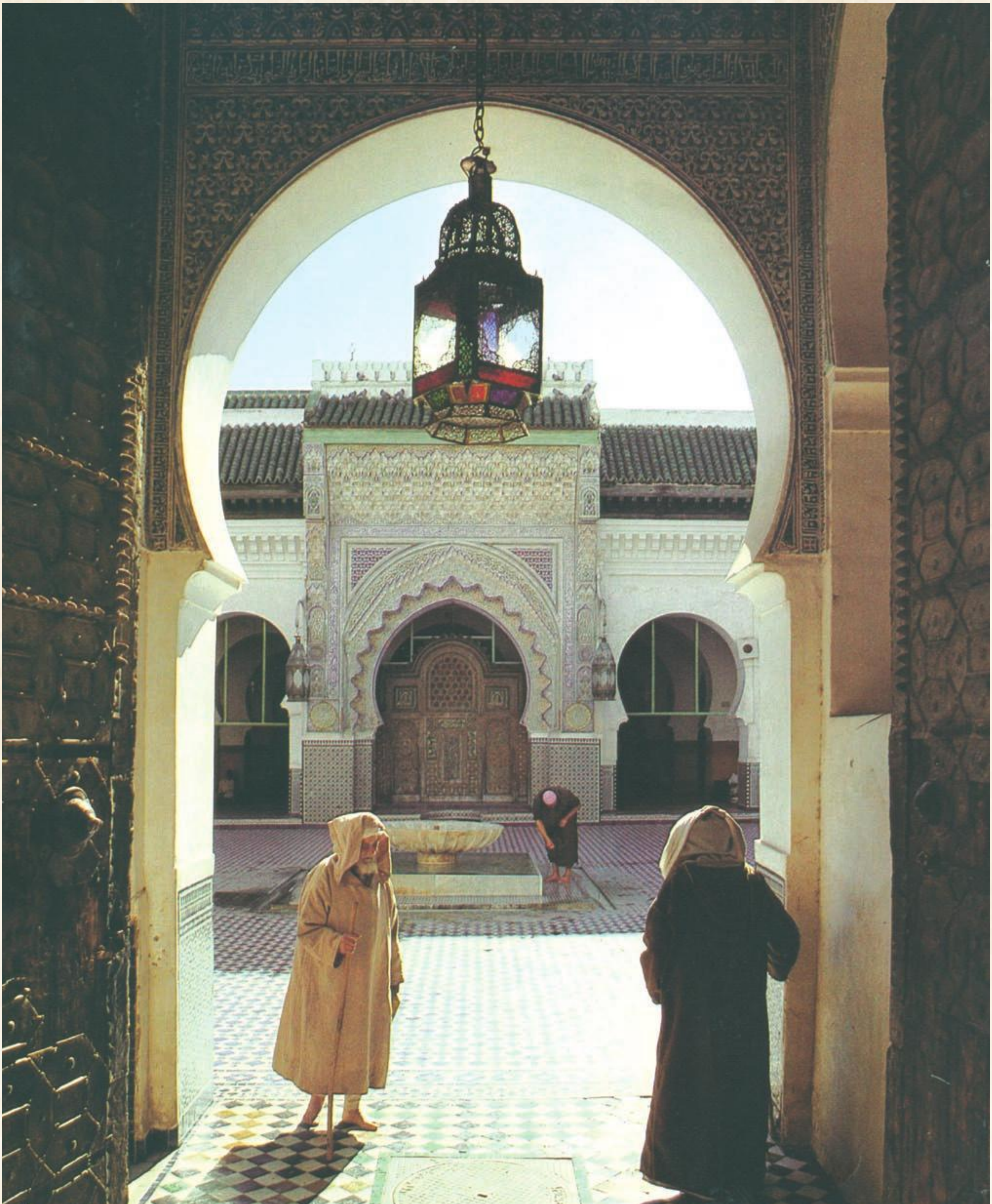
In a Muslim town, there are no residential areas reserved for the upper classes. In any case it is not easy to distinguish a poor family from a rich one by the exteriors of their houses. On the other hand, quarters often come into being as the result of tribal groupings. In the Ottoman empire, they coincide with military contingents.



282. Wākala al-Ghūrī, a Mamluk caravanserai, Cairo, Egypt

The organic unity of a residential area is expressed by the existence of a mosque, a Koran school, and heated baths of the Roman bath-house type, which are very important from the viewpoint of both hygiene and religion. In many cities, the various quarters had their own walls and gates.

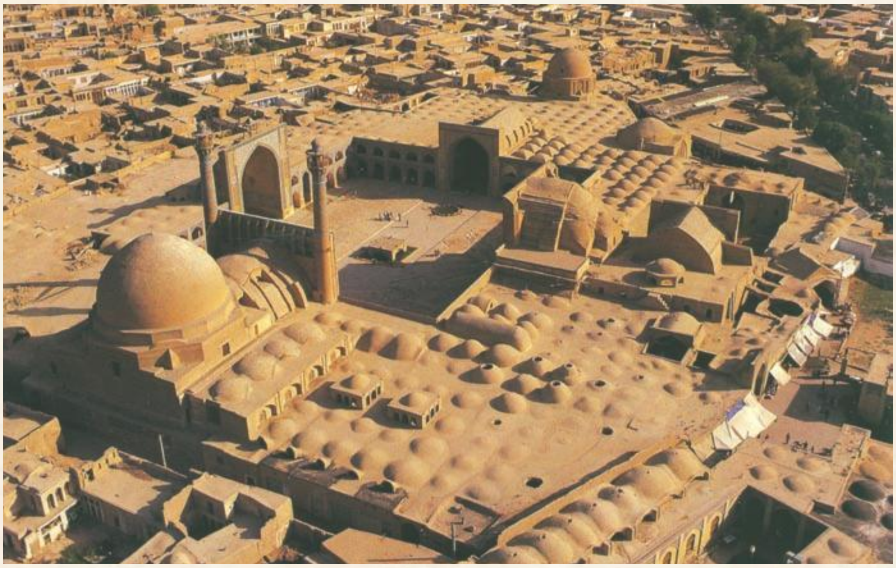
It is at the area level that there generally existed a sort of community organization, a council of notables dealing with highways and water-



283. Courtyard of the Qarawiyyīn Mosque, Fez, Morocco



284. View of the city of Marrakesh, Morocco

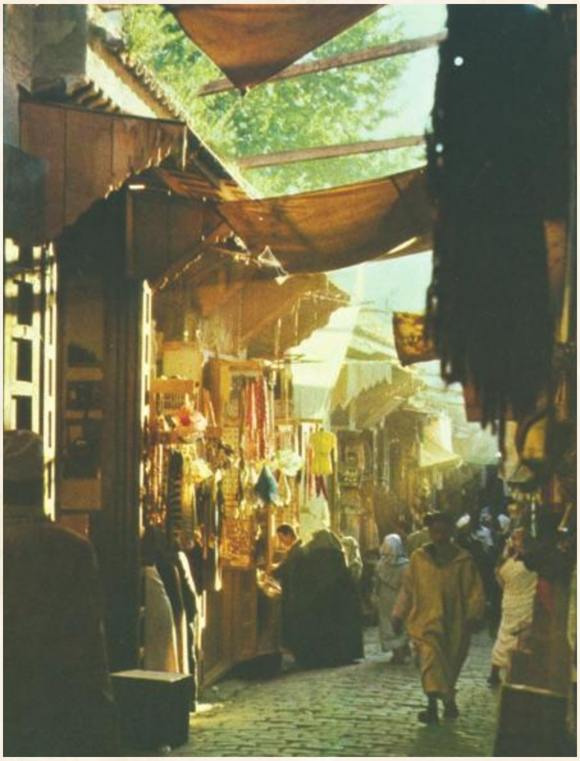


285. Aerial view of the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) of Iṣfahān, Persia

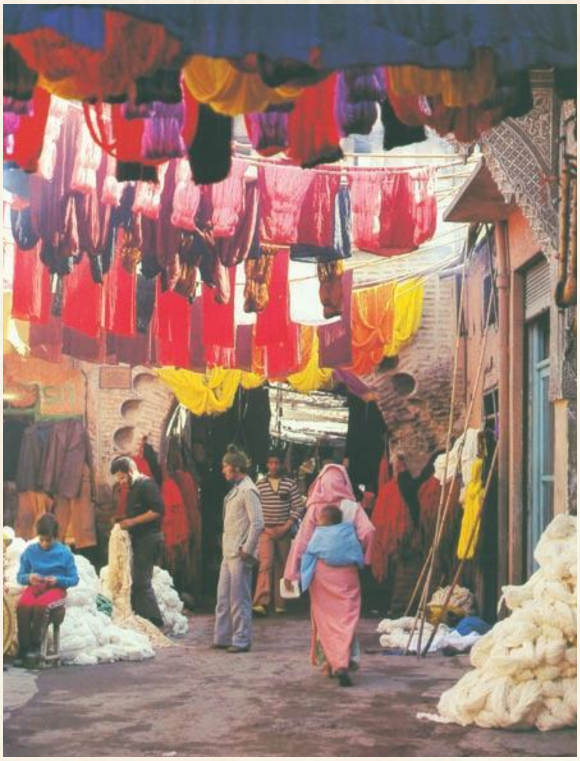
supplies. The city more or less administered itself through what might be called natural groups of self-interest, and needed only a strong guiding hand from above to be really well governed.

An assembly of honeycombs, separate yet unified, would describe the static aspect of a city; its dynamic aspect is the commercial life which flows through it like a river and draws to itself all professional activities.

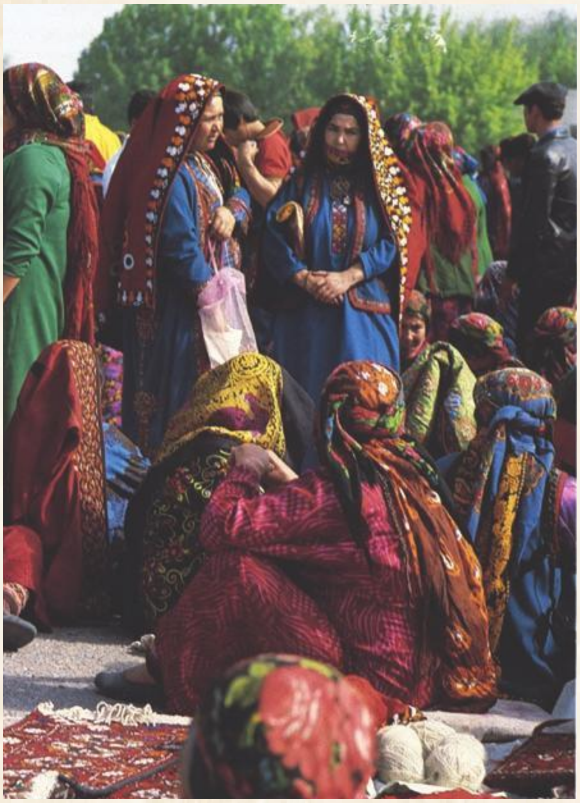
In principle, and on the model of Mecca, a Muslim town comes into being in the form of a market placed in the shadow of a sanctuary. The living quarters cluster around this market, in distinct tribes or clans, with the houses of old-established families or chieftains facing towards the sanctuary. Subsequently, and with the extension of the city, new markets are



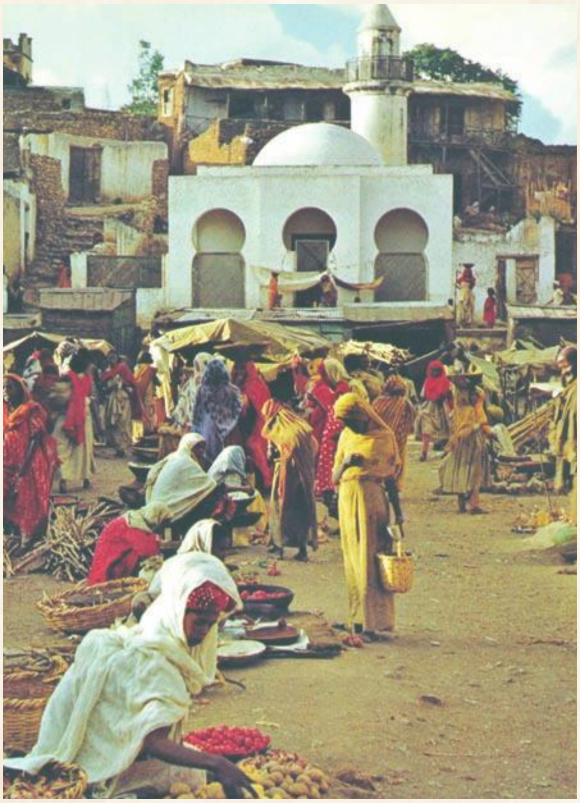
286. Market in Fez, Morocco



287. Market in Marrakesh, Morocco



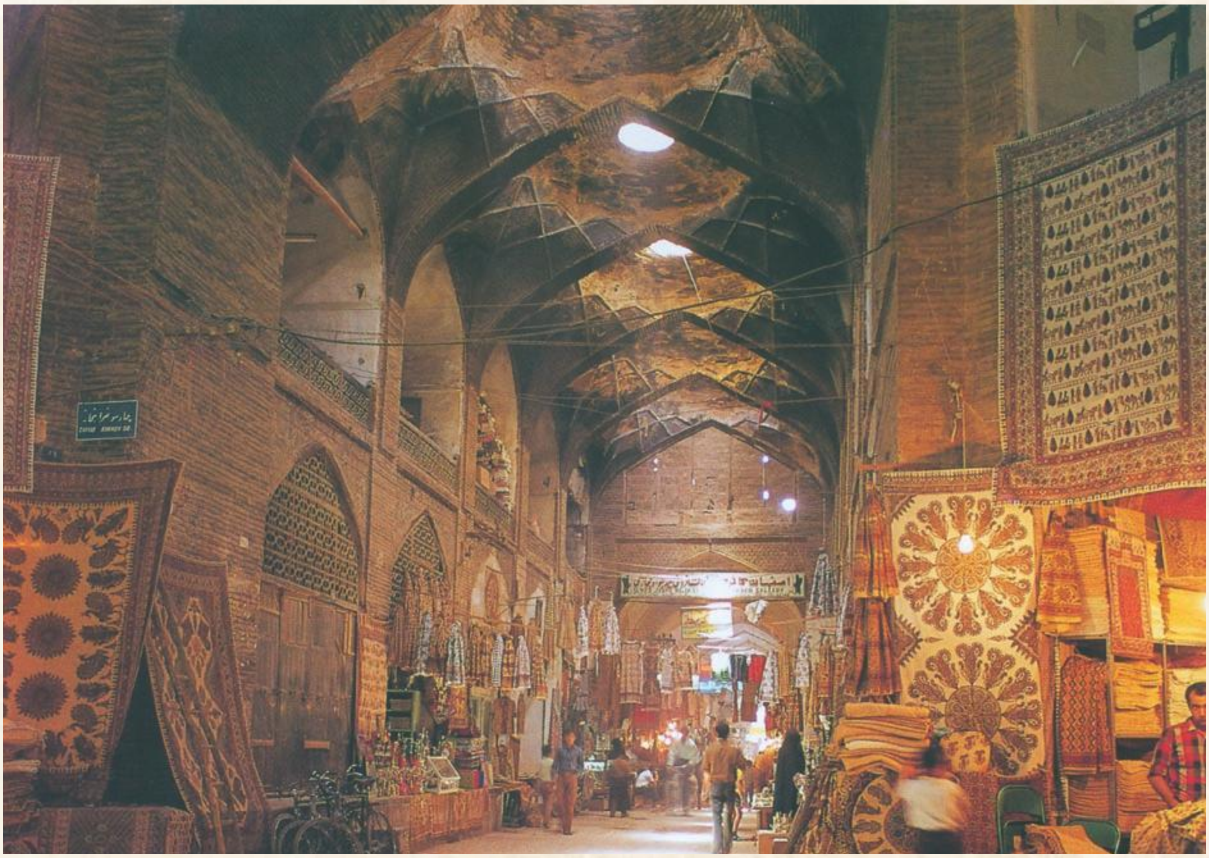
288. Turcoman market in Bukhara, Uzbekistan



289. Market in Harar, Ethiopia



Figure 56: Plan of the *bāzār* of Iṣfahān



290. An alley in the *bāzār* of Iṣfahān, Persia

established along the roads leading towards the central *sūq* which continues to be reserved for more precious commodities such as silks and jewels. Surrounded by walls, with doors which can be closed at night, this *qaysariyyah* plays the role of a kind of forum, and its name could well have an imperial or "Caesarian" origin.

In any event, neither the *qaysariyyah* nor the rest of the city have in general any great open squares—it is the mosques with their courtyards which serve as points of assembly for the citizens—and the traffic in goods and people, which flows from the city-gate to the center and back, becomes gradually slower as it approaches the heart of the city. The network of commercial and artisan roadways becomes increasingly dense; often covered with reed trellises or archways in rough brick, they are not made to facilitate transport but to proliferate points of contact between merchants, craftsmen, and clients. The principle of the *sūq* or *bāzār* is to eliminate every superfluous intermediary.

The conveyance and distribution of primary craft materials and basic produce are assured by the system of caravanserais (*khān* or *funduq*) which mark off the main highways and serve both as hotels and exchanges of merchandise. They usually take the form of vast courtyards surrounded by porticos, where mounts and beasts of burden can be made ready, with guest-rooms on the upper storey.

Craftsmen were organized in corporations, as they still are in certain countries. For this reason, there are whole streets and quarters reserved for particular callings, as in the towns of mediaeval Europe. Organization into corporations facilitates the supply of basic materials and precludes dishonest competition. And since professional rivalry is by no means forbidden but, on the contrary, stimulated by a sense of honor, the system ensures a good balance between individual initiative and the solidarity of the occupational group. Every corporation possessed, or still possesses, its *amīn*, or trustee, whose arbitration was never disputed in cases of litigation between members of the same profession. The prices and quality of all merchandise were, moreover, subject to the control of the inspector of markets, the *muḥtasib*.

The craft corporations are a typically urban institution, which has no analogy among the Bedouins. Among all the social groups, it is indubitably the corporations who best defend the specific interests of the city, while the military aristocracy, which is generally of Bedouin origin, gravitates round the Palace. But contrary to what occurred in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages, the corporations never aspired to political power. It was inconceivable for them to overreach the authority of the body of *ʿulamāʾ*, doctors of the Koranic sciences, who normally represent the community of believers in the pact of allegiance which each new sovereign must conclude with his people. Now the community is at once the city and something more than the city, which thus remains without any well-defined individuality, being an image, inevitably provisional, of the city *par excellence*, which is none other than the *Dār al-Islām*, "the Abode of Islam", a term which designates the entire territory of Islam as a haven of order and peace.

2 *Art and Contemplation*

The divorce between "art" and "craftsmanship" is a relatively recent European phenomenon which parallels the scission between "art" and "science". Formerly, every artist who produced an object was called a "craftsman", and every discipline which demanded not only theoretical knowledge but also practical ability was an "art". This remains true of the Islamic world wherever—and such places are becoming increasingly rare—there has been no Western influence. Art (*fann*) always involves technique (*ṣanʿah*) and science (*ʿilm*), and it is hardly necessary to add that this technique is a manual one and not that



291. Large slip-painted bowl with calligraphic inscription, Samarqand or Transoxiana, 10th century

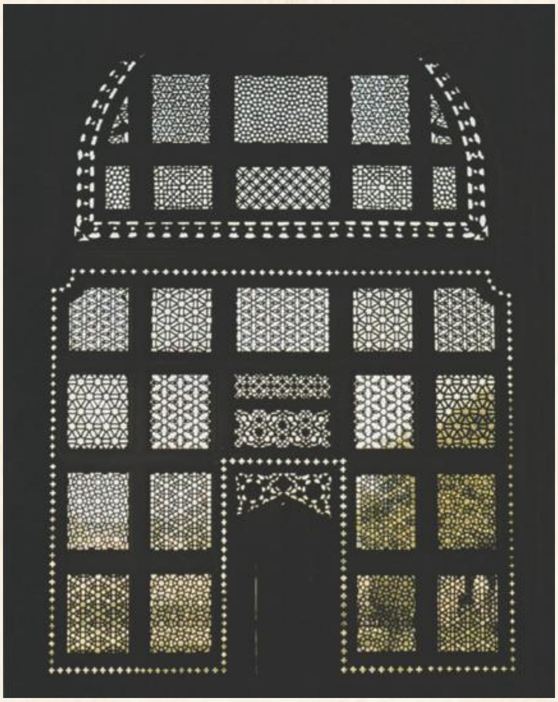
of a machine, and that the science of use to the artist has nothing in common with the sciences as taught in universities. The science needed by a master-mason, for example, is certainly geometry, but one that has a more practical character than that taught in schools—a master-mason must know how to trace an ogival arc by means of a simple cord—and which, on the other hand, is contemplative in its essence. Not only does it enable the parts of a task to be integrated into a harmonious whole; the schemes or key-patterns which it provides are like the mirror of the unseen unity which lies in the very seat of human intelligence. This is to say that the science transmitted with art always involves, at least implicitly, an aspect of wisdom (*ḥikmah*) which links its rational data with universal principles. It should be emphasized that expertise, in a traditional art, concerns both the technical and the aesthetic solutions to a given problem. Thus—to take up the example just mentioned—the procedure which enables the outline of an arc to be traced guarantees its stability as well as its elegance. Use and beauty go hand in hand in traditional art; they are two inseparable aspects of perfection, as it is understood in this saying of the Prophet: "God has prescribed perfection for all things" (*inna-ʾLlāha kataba ʾl-iḥṣāna ʿalā kulli shayʿ*), in which the term *iḥsān*, which we have translated "perfection", includes equally the sense of "beauty" and "virtue".

In the Islamic world, this maxim represents the moral and spiritual basis not only of the arts in the narrow sense of the term but of every manual skill, no matter how modest. Insofar as it may be performed with more or less perfection, it carries a value in itself, independent of its economic opportuneness. An exception has to be made, according to a fairly widespread conviction, for skills employing impure materials or having an element of artificiality about them, such as the work of the dyer, or of the goldsmith who "falsifies" metals by covering them with an amalgam of gold or silver.

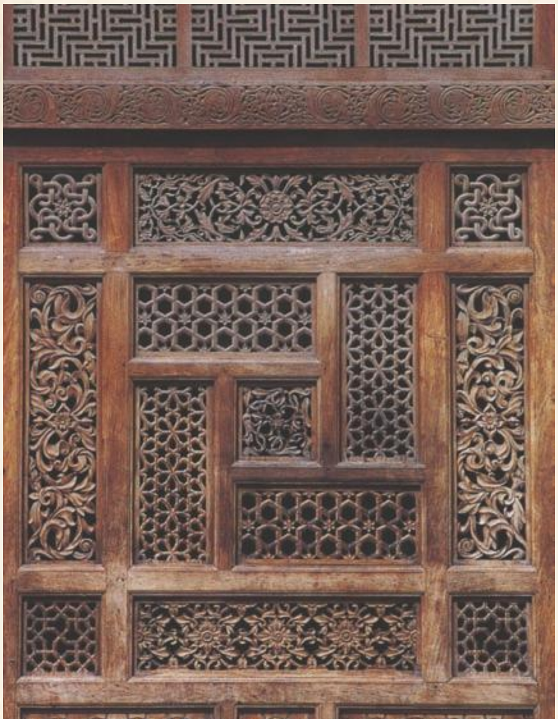
It could be said, on the whole, that the Muslim craftsman has never taken pains to perfect his instruments, though applying himself with much zeal and dexterity to the perfection of his work. This attitude is at least partly explicable by the very acute awareness a Muslim has of the ephemerality of things; art has always something provisional about it—"We shall surely make all that is upon it [the earth] barren dust" (Koran 18:8)—and the craftsman's



292. Mosque lamp in glass and enamel made in Syria, c. 1337



293. Detail from the interior of the Muḥammad Ghaus Mausoleum, Gwalior, India, c. 1565, showing the perforated panels on the verandah



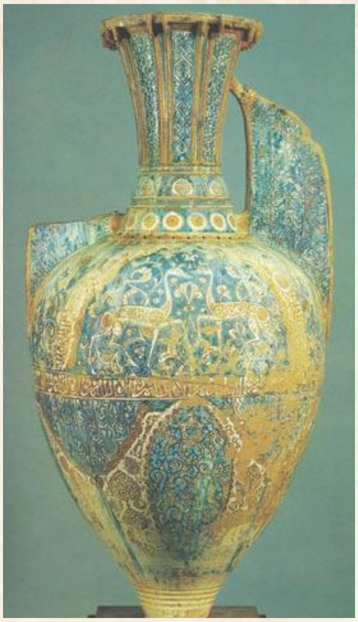
294. Wooden screen from the Mausoleum of Shāh Rukn-i ʿAlam in Mulṭān, Pakistan, 13th century

greatest achievement is the mastery he gains over himself. It is here that art converges into a spiritual discipline; the poorness of the instrument is none other than that of the "servitor" (*ʿabd*), while the beauty of the work can only be a reflection of the quality of the "Lord" (*rabb*).

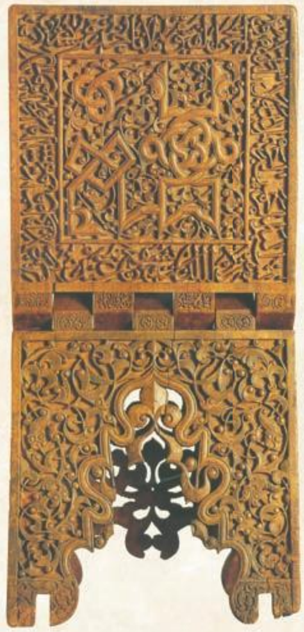
Art or craftsmanship has, in all, two aspects which predispose it to be the bearer of a method of spiritual realization. Art consists on the one hand in the frequently laborious transformation of a relatively shapeless material into an object shaped according to an ideal model. Now this shaping is indisputably an image of the work which a man aspiring to contemplation of divine realities must accomplish in himself and upon his own soul, which then plays the part of a rough material, confused and amorphous but potentially noble. On the other hand, the very object of contemplation is prefigured in the beauty that is apprehended by the senses, for it is in its depth none other than Beauty itself, unique and illimitable in its nature.

Not every artist is a born contemplative, but the affinity between art and contemplation is strong enough, in many Islamic cities, for entry into a craft corporation to coincide with attachment to a spiritual affiliation which goes back to the Prophet through ʿAlī, who is also the model of the perfect knight (*fatā*). The spiritual ideals of artistic skill and knighthood come together in a certain way since the one, like the other, lays stress on the perfecting of human nature. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that the craft corporations frequently provided military contingents for the defense of cities.

A certain category of skills, typified by the use they make of fire to transform or ennoble such material as metal or minerals into glass or enamels, serves as the base for a spiritual tradition which is linked to Hermes Trismegistus, whose Egyptian name is Thoth, and whom many Muslims include in the number of the ancient prophets. The Hermetic art *par excellence*, and the most commonly misunderstood, is alchemy, because the transmutation at which







Left: **295**. Vase from the Alhambra, Granada, Spain, Nasrid period, 14th or 15th century
Center: **296**. Copper and silver top of a cupboard that houses the Koran, Egypt, Mamluk period
Right: **297**. Koran stand, Seljuk period, 13th century

it aims, and which it transmits in craft terms, is situated in reality on the level of the soul. There is no reason to doubt that alchemy was practiced by many craftsmen who worked with fire; its emblem, a pair of interlaced dragons—a mediaeval version of the caduceus—appears on many receptacles in metal or ceramics.

Many craftsmen or artists belonged, or still belong, to particular Sufi orders, whether they received initiation simultaneously with their joining a corporation of craftsmen or not. Sufism is simply the esoterism of Islam, or its inward dimension. If the outer face of Islam is the revealed law and its practice, the inner face is understanding and the deepening of understanding. It is not wrong to call Sufism the mysticism of Islam, provided always that there is no relativization of the aspect of it that is wisdom, which is essential because it responds inwardly to the very first ordinance of Islam, which is to "witness", or to "bear witness to", Divine Unity.



298. Wooden penbox with mother-of-pearl inlay, Mughal period, in the style of Gujarat, mid 17th century. The lid is inscribed with the *basmalah*



299. Tile decoration in the Masjid-i-Jāmiʿ (Friday Mosque) of Iṣfahān, Persia

One can likewise say that Sufism lies where love and knowledge meet; now the ultimate and common object of both love and knowledge is none other than the Divine Beauty. It will then be seen that art, in a theocentric civilization like Islam, is linked to esoterism, the most inward dimension of tradition.

Art and contemplation: the object of art is beauty of form, whereas the object of contemplation is beauty beyond form, which unfolds the formal order qualitatively whilst infinitely surpassing it. To the extent that art is akin to contemplation it is knowledge, since Beauty is an aspect of Reality in the absolute meaning of the word. Nor is it the least of its aspects, for it reveals the unity and infinity that are immanent in things.

This brings us back to the first of our observations, the phenomenon of the scission between art and craftsmanship on the one hand and between art and science on the other, which has laid its mark profoundly on modern European civilization. If art is no longer considered a science—that is, a part of knowledge—it is because Beauty, the object of contemplation at various levels, is no longer recognized as an aspect of the Real. The normal order of things has, indeed, been so far overturned that ugliness is readily identified with reality, beauty being no more than the object of an aestheticism whose outlines are utterly subjective and shifting.

The consequences of this dichotomy in the experiencing of the Real are extremely serious, for it is finally beauty—subtly linked to the very source of things—that will pass judgment on the worth or futility of a world. As the Prophet said,

“God is beautiful and He loves beauty”



300. Dome of the Shaykh Luṭf-Allāh Mosque, Iṣfahān, Persia

Glossary

ʿabāʾa, a type of simple, cut garment.
ʿAbbās I, Safavid ruler of Iran, 1588-1629, responsible for the rebuilding of Iṣfahān.
Abbasids, caliphal dynasty, 749-1258.
ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān I, ruler of Umayyad Spain, 756-788, and founder of the Great Mosque of Córdoba.
Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī, great Muslim scholar, born 973 at Khīva.
Agra, sometime capital of the Mughal Empire in India.
aḥādīth, traditional sayings (pl. of *ḥadīth*).
Akbar, Mughal emperor, 1556-1605; responsible for the building of the tomb of Salīm Chishti at Fatehpur Sikri.
Alhambra, palace at Granada.
ʿAlī, the fourth caliph, 656-61, son-in-law and nephew of the Prophet.
alif, first letter of the Arabic alphabet.
Alī Q̄āpū, a royal residence on the Maydān in Iṣfahān (lit. "high gate").
Almohads, *al-muwaḥḥidūn*, 1130-1269, rulers of North Africa and Spain, originating in the High Atlas.
Almoravids, *al-murābiṭūn*, rulers of North Africa and Spain, 1056-1147, of nomadic origin in the Sahara.
amīn, trustee of a craft corporation.
anbiyāʾ, prophets (pl. of *nabī*).
Anjar, royal city of rectangular form in the Lebanon, built at the beginning of the eighth century.
al-Aqṣā, name of an important mosque in Jerusalem.
awliyāʾ, saints (pl. of *walī*).
awqāf, religious endowments (pl. of *waqf*).
al-aʿyān ath-thābitah, the immutable essences of things, archetypes.

bāʾ, second letter of the Arabic alphabet.
Baghdad School, name given to a particular group of Mesopotamian miniatures.
bāṭin, inward, esoteric, hidden.
bāzār, market area.
Bukhārā, important center of Islamic culture, now in Uzbekistan.

calamus, reed pen trimmed to a double point, used in Islamic calligraphy.
Chingiz Khān (Genghis Khan), great Mongol conqueror and leader, died 1227.
Córdoba, important city of Muslim Spain, site of the famous Great Mosque begun 785.
Court of Lions, part of the Alhambra palace in Granada.
Ctesiphon, Mesopotamian residence of the Sasanid kings.

dār al-imārah, the governor's palace of Abbasid Baghdad.
Damascus, Syrian town and site of the Great Mosque, 706-715.
dhuʾl-fiqār, the celebrated two-edged sword of ʿAlī.
dhuʾl-qarnayn, the two-horned (or "of two ages"), an epithet of Alexander the Great.
Dome of the Eagle, the tall cupola on an octagonal drum in the Great Mosque of Damascus.

al-fann, art.
Fās al-Jadīdah, the royal city of New Fez, Morocco, built by the Marinids in the mid-twelfth century.
fatā, the perfect knight.
Fatehpur Sikri, royal city built by Akbar some distance from Agra.
Fulani (Fulbe), nomads on the southern fringe of the Sahara who established a theocratic empire during the nineteenth century.
funduq, type of caravanserai.
futūwwah, term used to describe a knightly order.

Green Mosque, Yeşil Cami, a mosque at Bursa, Turkey, built 1405.

ḥadīth (pl. *aḥādīth*), traditional saying.
Hagia Sophia, the cathedral of Justinian in Istanbul, later converted to a mosque by the Ottomans.
ḥāʾik, seamless garment covering the head and shoulders.
al-Ḥakam II, ruler of Umayyad Spain, responsible for additions to the Great Mosque of Córdoba, 961-966.

Ḥanafī, traditional school of canonical law predominating in Egypt.
Ḥanbalī, traditional school of canonical law.
ḥaqīqah, formless essence (of the Koran), reality.
ḥaram, *sacratum*, outer precinct of the Kaʿba, forming part of the sanctuary or inviolable area.
ḥarām, inviolable.
Ḥarīrī, 1054-1122, the author of *Sessions.*
Hegira, the Muslim lunar calendar dating from 622, the time of the Prophet's emigration from Mecca to Medina.
Herat, important Islamic center, now in western Afghanistan.
ḥikmah, wisdom.
ḥubus, religious endowment.
Hülagü, Mongol ruler of Iran and conqueror of Baghdad in 1258.
Humāyūn, second Mughal emperor whose tomb was a precedent for the Taj Mahal, died 1556.

Ibn Khaldūn, Maghribī historian of the fourteenth century.
Ibn Ṭūlūn, governor of Egypt from 868 and builder of the great Mosque of Ibn Ṭūlūn, finished in 879.
Ibn az-Zubayr, early rival to the Umayyad caliphs, died 692.
iḥrām, the consecrated state of a pilgrim approaching the Kaʿba.
Īl-Khāns, Mongol rulers of Iran, 1256-1336.
ʿilm, science, knowledge.
al-ʿilm al-bāṭin, the inward science, esoterism.
imām, leader of the communal prayers who stands in front of the faithful.
Imām Mālik, c. 715-95, founder of one of the schools of canonical law.
islām, submission or abandonment to the Divine Purpose.
īwān, lofty semicircular vault, generally closed on one side and open on the other, characteristic of Persian architecture.

al-jāmiʿ, mosque where the Friday prayers are celebrated, sometimes called a "cathedral" mosque (lit. "what brings together").

Kaʿba, the edifice situated in Mecca which is the liturgical center of Islam and towards which Muslims pray (lit. "cube").
Kairouan (Qayrawān), important Islamic city now in Tunisia, site of the Great Mosque of Kairouan.
al-kathrah fiʾl-waḥdah, multiplicity in unity.
khān, caravanserai.
khānaqāh, dervish lodge.
Khirbat al-Mafjar, Umayyad country mansion.
Khwārizm, area around the delta of the Amu Darya (Oxus).
kiswah, vesture, traditionally of black cloth, which covers the Kaʿba.
Kūfī, style of calligraphy, named after the town of Kūfah in Iraq.
kulliyāt, an architectural complex usually comprising mosque, hospital, school, etc.

lā ilāha illāʾ Llāh, fundamental testimony of Islam (lit. "there is no divinity save God").
lām, name of a letter of the Arabic alphabet.
litham, half-veil.

Madīnat az-Zahrāʾ, royal city of Córdoba built by the Umayyads of Spain.
madrasah, college or school.
Maghrib, western part of the Islamic world, i.e., north-west Africa and Spain (lit. "west").
Maḥmūd of Ghazna, founder of an empire in Eastern Islam and conqueror of Northern India, reg. 998-1030.
Mālikī, traditional school of canonical law.
malwiyyah, a type of minaret in Mesopotamia (lit. "entwined").
mamlūk, slave.
Mamluks, rulers of Egypt 1250-1517, a military caste of former slaves.
al-Manṣūr, Abbasid caliph, 754-75, founder of Baghdad.
Marinids, rulers of Morocco in the thirteenth century, builders of New Fez.
māristān, hospital.
mashāhid (pl. of *mashhad*), burial places of those who sacrificed their lives for God.
Masjid-i Shāh, Mosque of the King, Iṣfahān, Iran.
Maydān, polo-ground, Iṣfahān.
maẓhar, place of appearance (of the Divinity).
Mecca, home of the Prophet and the site of the Kaʿba, now in Saudi Arabia.
Meccan Revelations, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyah*, the most famous work of Ibn al-ʿArabī.
Medina, the most important city of Islam after
Mecca, now in Saudi Arabia.
miḥrāb, prayer-niche indicating the direction of Mecca.
Mihrimah, mosque in Istanbul named after a princess.

minaret, place for the call to prayer.
minbar, pulpit in the form of a stepped throne.
Minya, site of an Umayyad palace on Lake Tiberias dating from 705.
miʿrāj, the ascension of the Prophet through the heavens.
mishkāh, niche (for a lamp).
mosque, Muslim place of prayer, *masjid* (lit. "place of prostration").
Mshattā, winter residence of the Umayyads, built about 750 and never completed.
Mughals, branch of the Timurids and founders of an empire in Northern India.
Muḥammad II, also know as Meḥmed II, Ottoman ruler and conqueror of Istanbul in 1453.
Muḥaqqaq, style of calligraphy.
muḥtasib, market inspector controlling prices and quality.
Muḥyīʾd-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, 1165-1240, one of the greatest masters of Muslim esoterism.
Mullā Murshīd of Shīrāz, one of the architects of the Taj Mahal.
Mumtāz-i Maḥal, wife of Shāh Jahān and for whom the Taj Mahal was built, died 1630.
muqarnas, element of Islamic architecture approximately described as "stalactites" or honeycombs.
Mustanṣiriyyah, a *madrasah* in thirteenth century Baghdad which served as a model for others.

Naskhī, fluid style of calligraphy.
Niẓāmiyyah, name of a *madrasah*, particularly at Nīshāpūr in the twelfth century, whose form served as a model for others.

Ottomans, 1281-1924, rulers of an empire based on Turkey and adjacent areas.

qanāh, underground canal.
Qaṣr al-Ḥayr, an Umayyad country mansion.
qaṭṭārah, underground canal.
qiblah, the direction of Mecca, towards which Muslims turn in prayer.
qīṣariyyah, *bāzār*, market area.
Qubbat aṣ-Ṣakhrah, Dome of the Rock mosque in Jerusalem, built 688-92; inaccurately called the Mosque of ʿUmar.
Quṣayr ʿAmra, Umayyad country mansion.
quṭb, pole, axis.

rajaz, form of Arabic verse.
Raqqa, place in Syria, site of the earliest example known of *muqarnas*.
ar-Rāshidūn, term used to describe the first four caliphs (lit. "well-guided").
riwāq (pl. of *rawq*), typical arcade found in Islamic buildings.
ar-Rūḥ, the Spirit or Essence.
rusul (pl. of *rasūl*), (divine) messengers.

Safavids, ruling dynasty of Iran, 1501-1732.
Salīm Chishti, important sage buried at Fatehpur Sikri.
Samarqand, important Islamic city, now in Uzbekistan.
Sāmarrā, city founded by the Abbasids on the banks of the Tigris.
ṣanʿah, technique, manufacture.
Sasanids, ruling dynasty of Iran prior to the Muslim conquests.
Seljuks, ruling dynasty of Iran and adjacent areas, 1038-1194.
Seljuks of Rūm, branch of the Seljuks who ruled Anatolia, 1077-1307.
Shāfiʿī, traditional school of canonical law.
Shāh-i Zindah, name of an architectural group at Samarqand.
Shāh Jahān, Mughal emperor, 1628-57, builder of the Taj Mahal.
Shaykh Luṭf-Allāh, name of a mosque on the Maydān in Iṣfahān.
Shehzade, name of a mosque in Istanbul.
Shīʿism, branch of Islam which holds that the Prophet's spiritual authority was bestowed upon ʿAlī and his descendents.
Sinān, Turkish architect, c. 1490-1583.
Sokollu Pasha, Ottoman official who gave his name to a mosque built by Sinān in 1570-71.
ṣuffāh, kind of gallery originally along a mosque wall facing the prayer area.
Sufism, esoteric aspect of Islam; the practitioners are called Ṣūfīs.
Sultan Ḥasan, ruler of Egypt, founder of the college mosque, 1361.
Sultan Selīm, Ottoman ruler, 1566-74, for whom the mosque at Edirne was constructed and the mosque of Sultan Selīm, 1569-75.
Sultan Süleymān, Ottoman ruler for whom the mosque of the same name was built, 1550-61.
Sunnah, customary usage (of the Prophet).

Sunnism, the major branch of Islam where the spiritual authority is based on the community's consensus.
sūq, market area.

Taj Mahal, *tāj-i maḥall* (lit. "the crown of the locality"), the masterpiece of Mughal art, built 1632-54.
ṭawāf, the rite of circumambulation about the Kaʿba.
tawḥīd, the bearing of witness, or the awareness, that "there is no divinity save God"; the consciousness or doctrine of Divine Unity.
Thuluth, style of Arabic calligraphy.
Tīmūr-i Lang, Tamberlane, the great conqueror and founder of the Timurids.
Timurids, dynasty ruling Eastern Islam, 1387-1502.

ʿulamāʾ, doctors of the Koranic sciences (sing. *ʿālim*).
ʿUmar, the second caliph, 634-44, and Companion of the Prophet.
ʿUmar II, an Umayyad caliph, noted for his piety, 717-20.
Umayyads, dynasty of caliphs, 661-750.
ummah, the religious collectivity or community.
ʿUqbah ibn Nāfiʿ, Companion of the Prophet and conqueror of North Africa.
ʿUthmān, the third caliph, 644-56, and Companion of the Prophet.

waḥdat al-wujūd, the unity of Real Existence.
al-waḥdah fi ʾl-kathrah, unity in multiplicity.
al-Walīd, Umayyad caliph, 705-15, builder of the Great Mosque of Damascus.

ẓāhir, outward, exoteric, manifest.

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Biographical Notes

TITUS BURCKHARDT, a German Swiss, was born in Florence in 1908 and died in Lausanne in 1984. He devoted all his life to the study and exposition of the different aspects of wisdom and tradition. In the age of modern science and technocracy, Titus Burckhardt was one of the most remarkable of the exponents of universal truth, in the realm of metaphysics as well as in the realm of cosmology and of traditional art. He was a major voice of the *philosophia perennis*, that "wisdom uncreate" that is expressed in Platonism, Vedanta, Sufism, Taoism, and other authentic esoteric or sapiential teachings. In literary and philosophic terms, he was an eminent member of the "Traditionalist" or "Perennialist" school of twentieth century thinkers and writers. Titus Burckhardt was also an expert on Islam, Islamic arts and crafts, and its spiritual dimension, Sufism.

Although Burckhardt was born in Florence, he was the scion of a patrician family of Basle, Switzerland. He was the great-nephew of the famous art-historian Jacob Burckhardt and the son of the sculptor Carl Burckhardt.

Burckhardt lived for many years in Fez, Morocco and was an integral part of the Moroccan government's successful preservation of the ancient medina of Fez as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. Burckhardt's work has also provided a blueprint for the preservation of other Islamic cities of great historical interest. In 1999 the Moroccan government sponsored an international symposium in Marrakech in honor of Burckhardt's work entitled, "Sagesse et Splendeur des Arts islamiques—Hommage à Titus Burckhardt". The proceedings were published with the financial assistance of UNESCO in 2000.

Burckhardt was also a senior consultant for over a decade to Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (founded in 1936), one of the world's leading architecture, urban design, engineering, and interior architecture firms, with projects in more than fifty countries. In that capacity he was a major factor in the preservation of architectural sites of immense historical importance in many Islamic countries.

Three of Burckhardt's illustrated books focus on Islamic art, culture, and spirituality. Burckhardt's *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning*, presented here as a revised commemorative edition, is considered by many to be the definitive study of the sacred art of Islam. *Moorish Culture in Spain* presents central elements of the Islamic culture that ruled Spain for eight-and-a-half centuries, while *Fez: City of Islam* presents the history of a people and their religion based upon Burckhardt's unrivaled knowledge of the city that he tirelessly helped to preserve under the auspices of UNESCO.

Another three of his illustrated books center on Christian art, culture, and spirituality. In addition to *Chartres and the Birth of Cathedral* there is *Siena: City of the Virgin*, which depicts, in his own words, "the destiny of a town in which the spiritual development of the Christian Western world from the Middle Ages up to the present day is exemplified". The award-winning anthology, *Foundations of Christian Art*, is a complement to these works.

These six illustrated books collectively demonstrate Burckhardt's unique ability to communicate the essence of the traditional Islamic and Christian worlds as if we had actually lived during those times. A selection of his other books on traditional art, science, culture, and spirituality is presented below. Burckhardt was fluent in German, French, Arabic, and English and wrote seventeen books in German, eight books in French, translated three books from Arabic into French, and wrote numerous articles in various languages. Fifteen of his books have been translated and published in English. A selection of his English-language writings is presented here and a complete bibliography is available on www.worldwisdom.com.

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World Wisdom, 2009

Seyyed Hossein Nasr is University Professor of Islamic Studies at the George Washington University. The author of over fifty books and five hundred articles, he is one of the world's most respected writers and speakers on Islam, its arts and sciences, and its traditional mystical path, Sufism. His publications include *Sufi Essays*, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, and *Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization*. A volume in the prestigious *Library of Living Philosophers* series has been dedicated to his thought. World Wisdom published *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* in 2007.

Jean-Louis Michon is a French traditionalist writer, editor, translator, Arabist, and artistic consultant who specializes in Islam in North Africa, Islamic art, and Sufism. From 1972 to 1980, Michon was Chief Technical Adviser to a series of joint programs by UNESCO, the UN Development Program, and the Moroccan government aimed at the preservation of traditional arts and crafts. His mission coincided in time with the one entrusted to his friend Titus Burckhardt for the preservation of the old city of Fez. Michon is the author of *Autobiography (Fahrasa) of a Moroccan Sufi: Ahmad Ibn 'Ajiba* and *Introduction to Traditional Islam, Illustrated: Foundations, Art, and Spirituality*. He is also co-editor (with Roger Gaetani) of *Sufism: Love & Wisdom*.

Titles on Islam by World Wisdom

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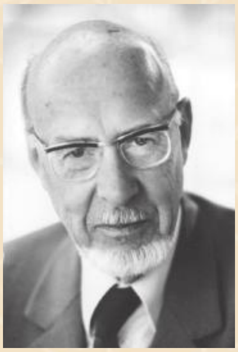
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edited by Judith and Michael Oren Fitzgerald, 2006

Unveiling the Garden of Love: Mystical Symbolism in Layla Majnun & Gita Govinda,
by Lalita Sinha, 2008

Islam / Art History

The author of over 20 books on art, religion, and spirituality, Titus Burckhardt (1908-1984) worked for many years as a UNESCO expert, helping to preserve the historic old city of Fez, Morocco. His masterpiece, *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning* was originally published in London in 1976 and is presented by World Wisdom in a fully revised edition with new illustrations.



- ❖ This edition commemorates the 100th birthday of the author, Titus Burckhardt;
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- ❖ Includes a new Introduction by Burckhardt's friend and collaborator, Jean-Louis Michon.

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—**Charles Le Gai Eaton**, author of *Islam and the Destiny of Man*

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—**Annemarie Schimmel**, Harvard University, author of *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*

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—**Seyyed Hossein Nasr**, The George Washington University, author of *Islamic Art and Spirituality*

"Those who can *do*, and know *why* they do, will always hold positions of dignity and true knowledge in the realm of the traditional arts. Titus Burckhardt is one such authority. My recollection of meeting with him is unforgettable. For the newcomer to the Islamic arts, my assurance is that you could not be in better hands than those of the great 'eternalist' Titus Burckhardt: he will take you to the very core and heart, if you are willing."

—**Keith Critchlow**, The Prince's School of Traditional Arts, author of *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach*

"Burckhardt's last major work was his widely acclaimed and impressive monograph *Art of Islam*. Here the intellectual principles and the spiritual role of artistic creativity in its Islamic forms are richly and generously displayed before us."

—**William Stoddart**, author of *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam*

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